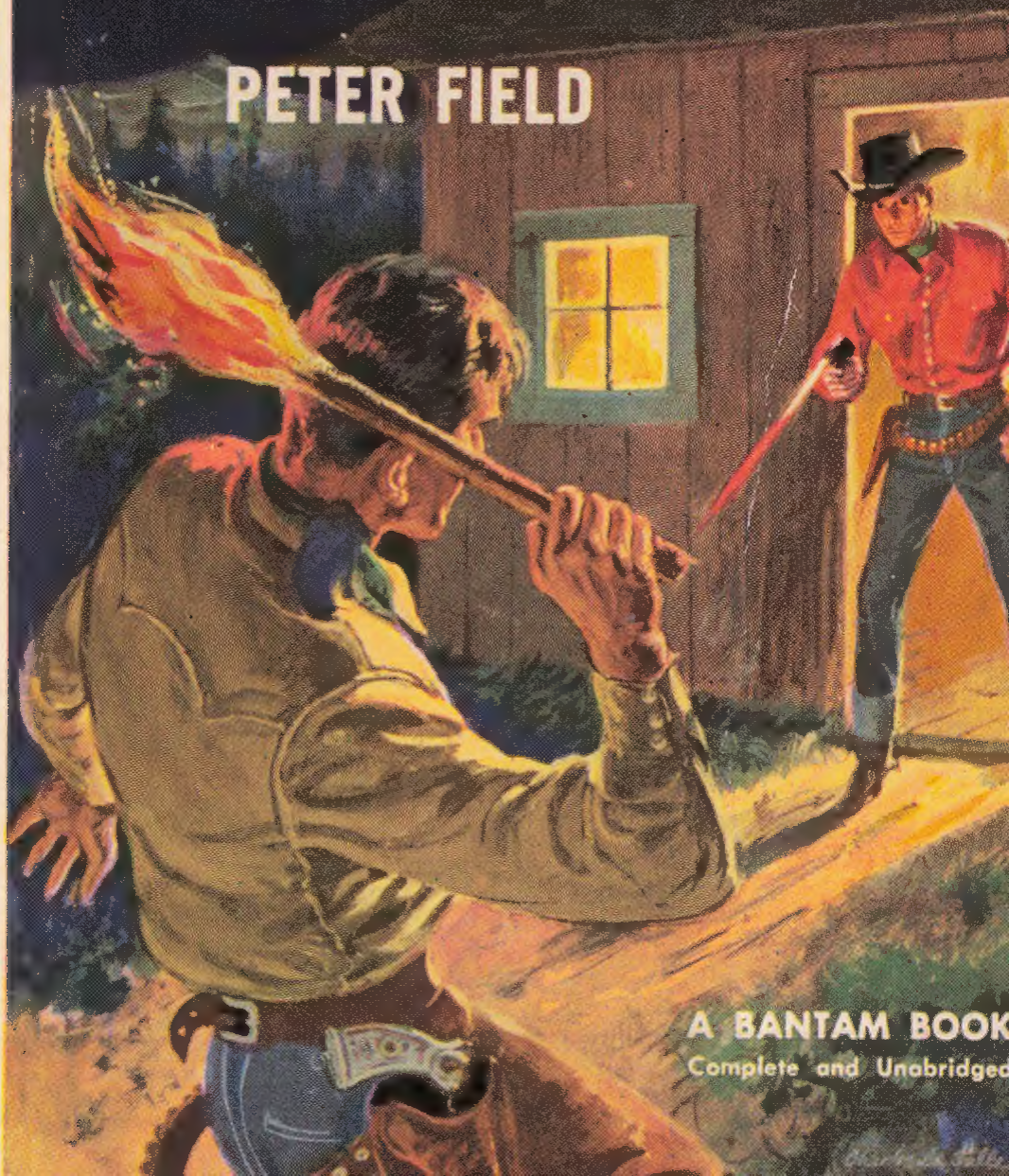
210 He Brought Blazing War to Colorado..

THE LAND GRABBER

(FIGHT FOR POWDER VALLEY)

PETER FIELD



A BANTAM BOOK
Complete and Unabridged

LONE WOLF TRAIL AGAINST LAND GRABBERS!

Pat Stevens was up to his elbows in trouble, hitting the trail for the toughest fight a two-fisted, fast-shooting cowpuncher ever faced. He lost his creek land and his friends. His neighbors didn't trust him, and even the Law was against him.

But Powder Valley was worth fighting for, and Pat played a lone hand. He took a beating from a tenderfoot, but that didn't stop him. He had to pull a gun on his own partners, but he kept right on. He even had to fight his way out of the Denver jail in order to see the fight through.

Against the roar of pounding hooves and the sudden flare of a torch in the black western night, Pat Stevens tracks a vicious land grabber—a crook with the law on his side!

About THE COVER

They were close to the powderhouse now, hate-crazed men rushing forward to smash the man who, single-handed, thwarted their destructive purpose. A torch flared outside, and he jerked his head to see an arm poised to throw. He fired quickly with Hank's gun . . .

Illustrated by Charles La Salle

The Land Grabber

Originally published under the title
Fight for Powder Valley!

BY PETER FIELD

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THE LAND GRABBER

(FIGHT FOR POWDER VALLEY)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PAT STEVENS was up against the toughest fight of his two-fisted career, and this time he was fighting alone—against the land company, his neighbors—and the Law!

JOE HARTSELL bought a farm in Powder Valley . . . and found a hate-filled posse waiting for him when he got there.

ROSS CULVER was hired to do a surveying job for the most ruthless land grabber Powder Valley ever saw.

JUDSON BILOFF thought he could trick Powder Valley ranchers because the law was on his side.

SAM SLOAN was a little guy with a lot of ideas. He knew whatever Pat Stevens did would be OK.

EZRA was a redheaded, one-eyed giant, Sam's two-gun partner.

JINGLE JOEL had a jug full of applejack and a head full of rhymes.

1

THE LITTLE FRAME HOUSE STOOD alone and unprotected on the flat Kansas prairie. Unpainted, the weathered board siding was warped by the terrific heat of many Kansas summers, each board drawing away from its fellows and leaving cracks through which the sand sifted when the winds blew.

A picket fence straggled disconsolately around a small yard of hard-packed dirt, baked to the consistency of concrete by the blazing heat of the sun that hung in an always cloudless sky.

In the rear of the four-room frame house half a dozen Leghorn chickens were huddled in the shade of a chicken coop where a thermometer would stand at one hundred and twenty degrees a full ten hours of each day.

It was only a few degrees cooler in the tiny kitchen where Molly Hartsell stood at a window staring out at the long straight road leading away into the flat nothingness of the West. There were cultivated fields on each side of the road as far as Molly could see. Straight rows of dwarfed cornstalks scorched and drooping under the white-hot fury of the sun. The outer edges of the leaves were already beginning to turn brown and the stalks had ceased their struggle for growth entirely.

Molly Hartsell held to the windowsill with one hand and brushed limp strands of hair back from her face with the other. Her features were thin and sharp, her lips bloodless. Her eyes were haunted by despair, veiled with apathy. Her body was thin and angular, flat-breasted like an old woman's. She was twenty-seven years old, but the past ten years on the desolate prairie farm had taken their toll of the vibrant young girl who had come to Kansas as Joe Hartsell's bride from Pennsylvania.

Through a doorway into the dining room, Molly could see Mary and Joey playing together on the uncovered floor. Mary was nine and Joey was seven. They had grave, unchildlike faces. Their hair had a curious lack of color, as though all the pigment had been bleached from it by too much exposure to the pitiless Kansas sun. They were playing "going away" without much enthusiasm, packing and unpacking an old grip which Molly had brought with her from Pennsylvania. They were thin, listless children, improperly nourished and completely lacking that bright expectancy of hope that is every child's natural heritage.

Baby-Doll sat on the floor behind Molly. Baby-Doll was not quite two years old. She still retained a hint of babyish plumpness, but the dimples were fast going away and she, too, wore a grave, preoccupied look as she sucked on her big toe and didn't get any nourishment from it.

A cloud of white dust balled up from the shimmering heat waves westward. It hung low above the horizon without perceptible movement, yet Molly Hartsell's thin features took on a curious tenseness as she stared at it.

That would be her husband returning from the county seat. He had set out before sunup that morning in the lumber wagon. Molly gripped the windowsill with both hands, and her knuckles turned white with strain. She was hardly conscious of what she did, but a little prayer formed in her mind. Dear God—please, dear God—the unspoken words repeated themselves over and over monotonously in her mind.

The ball of white dust was growing larger now, suspended above a black speck in the roadway.

She turned away from the window, setting her white teeth together tightly. She wore a single faded garment of gingham which clung dankly to her thin body. She was barefooted, and when she moved from the window

the sweaty imprint of each slender foot remained behind momentarily on the wooden floor.

She said, "Don't do that, Baby-Doll," but her voice was listless and without conviction. Baby-Doll kept right on sucking her toe, though with an air of stubbornness rather than of any real hope.

Molly moved slowly to the doorway leading into the dining room and cautioned, "You'd better put your things away now, children. Your father's coming home."

Joey turned quickly, his little face screwed into a fleeting look of interest. "Will he bring us some candy, Mom?"

Nine-year-old Mary answered for her mother. " 'Course he won't. He's been to the bank to see 'bout the mortgage."

"But he might get some candy, too," protested Joey.

"Naw," said Mary from the lordly pinnacle of her advanced years. "You can't buy candy an' pay mortgages too, can you, Mom?"

Molly Hartsell said, "I wouldn't count on any candy, children. But there'll be some syrup . . . and I'll make potato pancakes for supper."

Neither of the children greeted this substitute with marked enthusiasm. They began gathering up their toys from the middle of the floor.

Molly returned to her vigil at the kitchen window. The team of horses and wagon were close now. The team was trotting. Molly noted this phenomenon with surprise. A small fever of excitement took possession of her veins. Could it be possible that Joe . . . ?

No. She knew Joe too well. Deep inside her husband was a streak of stubbornness that nothing could overcome. He would have made some arrangements to renew the mortgage. He always did. He had been renewing it for ten years. Ten years of constant struggle to keep the interest and taxes paid. Ten years during which the

fertile land had yielded exactly two crops. The other eight crops had either been burned up by the sun or washed out by floods before the corn had had a chance to mature.

She could see Joe now. Sitting very erect on the spring seat of the heavy wagon. A mist clouded Molly's eyes. She did not wipe it away. Through the mist she saw her husband as he had been a decade before—before Kansas had taken its toll of his youth and his strength. He had been proud then, ambitious and sure of himself—so sure of his destiny—so eager to prove to his young wife that they had made no mistake in turning their faces westward from the East in which they had been reared.

She blinked her eyes shut and tears rolled down her cheeks. She gripped the sill fiercely and prayed to God for strength to greet Joe with a smile when he returned to tell her everything was arranged so they could remain on the farm and starve another year. That was all she could hope for now. A year-to-year struggle to keep possession of the farm, with always the faint hope that *next* year would be different; that *next* year nature would smile on them and let them make a crop.

Molly Hartsell stooped and lifted the hem of her cotton dress to wipe the tears from her cheeks and eyes. She could hear Joe turning into the yard now. The dull thud of heavy hoofs and the creaking of the old wagon.

She moved slowly to the back door, forcing her lips to form the wistful semblance of a smile for her husband.

He climbed down from the front hub of the wagon to the ground. The team stood with drooped heads, their flanks heaving and wet with sweat.

Joe Hartsell was a tall, gaunt man. His face was the color of old leather, seamed with weariness and with an inward sense of futility which gave him the look of an old man. His wide shoulders were stooped as though under the weight of a burden which never left his back:

his eyes were a pale, washed-out blue beneath ragged brown eyebrows.

He lifted a box of groceries from the wagon and said, "Hello, Molly," cheerfully enough.

She answered him with the same enforced accent on cheerfulness. The children came crowding into the kitchen to stand around in big-eyed hope while he set the box of groceries carefully on the oilcloth-covered table. They knew better than to ask for candy, but they were not yet old enough to cease hoping for a miracle.

"Hot today," said Joe Hartsell. He held out his big work-worn hands to Molly. The sleeves of his patched shirt were short, showing knobby, sunburned wrists.

Molly said, "Yes. It has been hot." She moved toward him slowly, catching her lower lip between her teeth. Joe's big hands were as gentle as a woman's. He put them on Molly's shoulders and drew her close to him. He laid his lean cheek against her hair and answered her unasked question:

"I saw Mr. Morgan at the bank today."

The strength went out of Molly. She leaned against Joe, pressing her face against his chest. In a smothered tone, she surmised hopelessly, "I suppose you fixed everything up all right."

He said, "N-o-o, Molly. Not exactly, that is . . ."

His tone was so queer that Molly leaned back against his hands to look up into his face. There was no mist over her eyes this time, yet she had that same strange feeling that had come to her while she watched him drive up. This hardly seemed the husband she knew so well. He was more like the man she had married long ago. The worn features remained the same, but there was a suggestion of inner tensity that gave him back something of the youth he had lost along the way. His eyes had a brightness she had not seen for a long time.

She began to breathe swiftly through compressed lips.

"Oh, Joe! Mr. Morgan refused to renew the mortgage?" Though she knew it would hurt him she could not keep the singing tone of gladness from her voice.

Joe looked puzzled. "Why, no, Molly. I guess Mr. Morgan knows I'm a good risk." He paused to clear his throat.

The animation went out of Molly's face. She said dully, "Oh. I thought maybe . . ."

"I've decided to give up the farm." Joe spoke humbly. He looked away from Molly, over her head. Corded muscles stood out on either side of his throat. "After all these years . . . I guess I have to admit we just can't make a go of it. I've tried, Molly, for you and the children."

"Oh, Joe!" Molly was crying. She clung to him fiercely.

A look of hurt fled across Joe's face. "I guess I'm not much of a husband. I haven't been able to give you much of the things you deserve. And now . . . I've got to admit Kansas has got me licked."

He stopped uncertainly. Molly was choking, laughing hysterically through her sobs. Her upturned face was radiant.

"You . . . you don't mind?"

"Mind? Oh God, Joe. If you only knew how I've prayed . . ."

"That's all right then. That's wonderful. I might have known you'd take it like that. But I got to worrying after I made the deal. A man never knows about a woman. Some of them are funny about leaving their homes. . . ."

"We're really going to leave, Joe? It's all settled?"

"Yep. I signed the papers today. Bank took over the farm . . . gave me five hundred dollars clear over and above the mortgage. That's not much, but . . ."

"Much? It sounds like a million dollars to me. Why, with five hundred dollars . . . that's enough to get started again."

"Yep. That's what I figured. When it all came up so sudden . . ."

"I'll have to get off a letter to Mother," Molly planned happily. "Just think, Joe, she's never seen any of her grandchildren. How soon can we leave? When shall I tell her we'll arrive?"

Joe's face wore a confused look of fright. "You haven't let me tell you, honey. We're not going back. We're headed West. To Colorado. To Powder Valley." He rolled the words out softly as though they tasted good on his lips. "How does that sound to you?"

Molly drew back from him. She groped behind her, caught hold of a kitchen chair and settled herself carefully in it. "Powder Valley? What do you mean, Joe?"

"Why, it's all settled. Luckiest thing in the world. The man happened to be right there in the bank while I was talking to Mr. Morgan. It's a big land company. Irrigation, Molly! That's the ticket. No more waiting for it to rain . . . and then getting a flood. Irrigation's the coming thing. All the water you want when you want it. It's virgin soil. Never been touched by a plow. You can grow anything. Garden truck. Fruit. You can have a flower garden. It's a valley in the mountains, honey. Protected by the hills from heavy snow. They're building a dam right now to store up water for the farmers that'll be flocking in."

"And you . . . you mean you've . . . already decided . . . ?"

"I had to, Molly. A chance like that doesn't come every day. We're the first buyers and we got our pick. Fifty acres right in the bottom land. Ten dollars an acre is all it costs. Imagine that . . . for land that'll be worth a hundred an acre as soon as it's under cultivation. You see, they want settlers to move in and get things started. The price will go up as soon as word gets around. It's cool in Colorado, Molly. Bright sunlight and clear air.

And there's hunting and trapping in the winter . . . why, Mr. Shultz says a man can feed his family the year 'round on game and fish."

"Powder Valley?" Molly repeated again, as though the two words hypnotized her.

"It isn't so far from here. Only a couple of hundred miles. A nice little vacation trip, Molly. LLike when we first came to Kansas. Do you remember?"

Molly nodded. Yes, she remembered.

"I thought we'd make out a list of what we can take in the wagon and have a sale to get rid of everything else. That'll bring in enough money to get us there all right."

Joe Hartsell was striding up and down the kitchen, pounding a bony fist into a calloused palm. The two children had drawn back into the doorway, watching him out of big, interested eyes. Baby-Doll kept her place on the floor, again trying to draw nourishment out of her big toe.

"It'll be pioneering, Molly. Real pioneering this time. It's what I was looking for when we first came West. We shouldn't have stopped here. We should have kept on going. But it's not too late. Powder Valley. West to Powder Valley! Doesn't that sort of wake up the blood in your veins?"

Molly said, "Yes, Joe." She slowly arose from her chair. There was an exalted look of martyrdom on her pinched features. She whispered, "Yes, Joe. If that's what you want," and caught him to press a fierce kiss on his astonished lips.

2

A FEELING OF PRIDE ALWAYS WELLED up inside Pat Stevens when he rode down into Powder Valley from the headquarters of the Lazy Mare ranch at

the northern end of the valley. It wasn't so much a specific pride in ownership of one of the largest and finest spreads in the valley; it was more a deep-rooted sense of fulfillment, a feeling of belonging, an awed sort of pride in the realization that he, Pat Stevens, had had an integral part in making Powder Valley what it was today—one of the finest strips of cattle country in the entire West.

Serene and peaceful under the bright Colorado sunlight, Powder Valley stretched out southward from the Lazy Mare ranch a distance of some thirty miles, protected on the north by the Culebra Range, with the jagged Spanish Peaks forming a natural barrier on the southwest. A protected region of lush range grass, with mild winters that were just cold enough to build firm flesh on the sturdy, big-boned Herefords that Pat had been instrumental in bringing to the valley years before, it was, indeed, virtually a cattleman's paradise. In the spring and summer the herds ranged high on the mountain slopes that had been blanketed with snow all winter to provide sufficient moisture for the new growth of rich grass, and in the fall the stock was moved down into the protected valley to winter-feed on the long grass that grew knee-high in the bottom lands on each side of straggling Powder Creek.

Powder Valley had not always been a scene of serenity and peace, nor had Pat Stevens always been a respectable and settled landowner. Both had a turbulent history of bloodshed and violence; both had, in a sense, attained respectability together.

It had been more than ten years now, since Pat Stevens had ridden into the valley with his two gun-fighting partners, Sam Sloan and One-Eyed Ezra, to do battle with the West's most vicious gang of outlaws; a fight to the death that ended by overthrowing the reign of terror that had held the valley in thralldom and making it a

place where honest men could once more ride abroad in safety and in peace.

It had ended, too, the wild free life that Pat Stevens had known before. Sally Stevens had seen to that. Marriage to Sally had been good for Pat. She had given him a son and a sense of responsibility.

Now it was a mellowed and a mature Pat Stevens who rode away from the Lazy Mare toward the little town of Dutch Springs one afternoon in late spring. Slightly heavier, though still retaining the trim lines given him by a vigorous youth spent in the saddle, with a tinge of premature gray, now, along the edges of his hair; his gray eyes were clear and bright, without that steely hardness that had been characteristic of them when he had worn two guns in open holsters and his gaze had challenged any man to draw against him.

Always, when Pat rode down into the valley nowadays, he drank in the clear cool air of the high mountain valley and let his gaze roam over the peaceful scene with a queer uneasy sense of foreboding within him. It was crazy, of course. There was no reason for it. Except—well sometimes he thought it was just too damn good to be true. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was standing off by the side and critically surveying himself as he rode. Not a worry in the world. Yet, long ago, he had learned that life has a way of providing irritations just when things are going along the smoothest.

Somehow, it just didn't seem as if the Lord intended men to have things too easy. And maybe that was for the best, he ruminated. A man had a way of getting soft inside when things went along too smooth. As he rounded a turn that opened out the long vista of the valley to his gaze, he noted some small objects moving down in the bottoms against the background of green willows that lined the creek banks.

He pulled up his horse and frowned at the sight.

wondering which of his neighboring ranchers was disregarding tradition by grazing the rich feed that was always left for winter forage.

His frown deepened when he realized the small objects were not grazing cattle or horses, but were human beings. Men on foot. This was a sight so alien to the cattle country that Pat Stevens couldn't believe his eyes at first.

But that's what they were, all right. Three or four of them in a group, and another one by himself standing back a few hundred yards from the others.

From the road, Pat couldn't be sure whether they were on Lazy Mare property or across the line on John Boyd's Bar X spread which joined his ranch on the south.

He sat easily in the saddle with his Stetson tipped back on his head, a speculative light in his eyes. It couldn't be boys hunting jack rabbits—and it wasn't a fencing crew.

He jiggled the reins and turned his horse off the road to ride down that way and satisfy his curiosity.

As he rode nearer he saw that the unmounted men were on Bar X property, about a mile back from the creek. He still couldn't figure out what they were doing there. He now saw there were four of them altogether. One seemed to be going quite a distance ahead, while two others followed him, remaining a certain distance apart and stopping briefly to stoop down at stated intervals. Funniest darned way of acting he ever had seen. And they were grown men, too.

When he got close enough to see that the man who remained alone in the rear was standing in front of a queer-looking brass instrument mounted on three wooden legs, Pat suddenly realized what the men were doing. His bronze face relaxed in a chuckle at his own expense. They were surveyors, that's what. Measuring off a line with a chain made of iron links. He had seen

government surveyors running section lines before, and he should have known that's what it was. But he wondered why government surveyors were bothering to run section lines through John Boyd's ranch. That wasn't his property line. Boyd owned all the land right down to the creek.

The surveyor was leaning forward looking through his brass telescope when Pat rode up. He was waving to a man almost half a mile ahead. The man had a pole painted with red and white stripes, and he moved the pole back and forth as the man at the instrument waved to him.

Pat cocked one leg over the saddle horn and rolled a cigarette, watching the proceedings with grave interest. Kind of a funny way to do, he thought indulgently, worrying about a few inches this way or that when there were so dang many miles of open country up and down the creek that it didn't really matter where a section line went. But that was their business, he reckoned, just like his was cattle raising.

The surveyor was a young man, under thirty, Pat thought. He wore leather boots laced tightly all the way up to his knees, with fancy riding pants that were like a little boy's breeches. He had on a khaki shirt buttoned up tight at the neck with a black four-in-hand tie, and on his head was a hard-brimmed Stetson like soldiers and Easterners wore.

He hadn't been West very long, Pat decided, appraising him as he continued to be finicky about where the man in front put his painted pole. His features were sunburnt and the skin was peeling from his cheeks. The backs of his hands were red and blistered also. That always happened to Easterners when they were first exposed to the deceptively mild Colorado sun.

The surveyor began frantically waving both hands over his head as though he had suddenly gone mad. He

stepped back from his three-legged surveying instrument and nodded to Pat with a pleasant, "Good afternoon."

He had a smooth agreeable voice, and a well-knit body that showed strength without bulkiness.

Pat Stevens said, "Howdy." Then drawled, "Runnin' some sections lines, I reckon?"

The young man smiled and took out a white handkerchief to mop his face. He said, "Yes. That's what I'm doing right now."

"How come that Boyd is surveying off this creek section? Is he aimin' to fence it in?" asked Pat curiously.

The surveyor said, "Boyd?" in a tone of surprise, screwing up his face.

"Yeh. The fellow you're workin' for. This is the Bar X ranch."

"Oh. I see who you mean. The rancher who owns the rest of this property." The surveyor negligently waved his hand westward, away from the creek. "I didn't know his name."

"What do you mean . . . rest of this property?" Pat demanded. "John's holdin's ran all the way to the creek the last I heard."

"They don't now. This is his new property line that I'm surveying."

"You mean John's sold this creek section?"

The surveyor nodded. "Not only this section but two more south of here."

Pat said, "I'll be doggoned. Who bought 'em from him?"

"The Colorado Western Land and Development Company owns all this creek land now."

Pat Stevens suddenly tensed in the saddle. He lowered his lids, making his gray eyes into slits. "That's a mighty important-sounding name you just said. What do they aim to do with John's sections?"

"Develop it for farming. It's an irrigation project.

It's not only these three sections but a strip a mile wide on each side of the creek all along the floor of the valley."

Pat's face grew hard. He struck a match and held it to the tip of his soggy half-smoked cigarette. He drew a puff of smoke into his lungs and let it roll out of his nostrils, then queried quietly, "You mean on beyond north of the Bar X too?"

The surveyor drew a folded map from his pocket and spread it out on the ground. He squatted down and squinted at the black lines. He nodded. "I go a mile beyond the Bar X line . . . take in one section from . . uh . . . the Lazy Mare ranch."

Pat slid out of the saddle and dropped his reins to the ground. "I'd be obliged for a look at that map," he said gruffly. "My name's Pat Stevens."

"Certainly, Mr. Stevens. My name is Ross Culver." The surveyor stood up and extended his hand. Pat took it and received a firm handclasp.

Culver squatted again, moving aside so Pat could lean over and see the map. "All this shaded area is company property," the surveyor explained. "See, we own a solid block on both sides of the creek up and down the valley. A mighty fine and promising project," he went on enthusiastically. "As soon as we get our irrigation system in, we'll transform all this wasteland into a really productive tract."

Pat was staring down at the map with slitted eyes. "Where's the line between the Bar X and the Lazy Mare?" he demanded.

Culver promptly put the tip of his finger on the map. "Right there. And about here is where we are now." He moved his finger down the edge of the shaded area a quarter of an inch.

"There's something wrong," Pat told him quietly. "You'd better check up on your deeds before you do any more surveying."

"That's impossible," Culver smiled. "I checked the records in the land office at Denver before coming out."

"All the same, there's some mistake. The Lazy Mare is my ranch. I haven't sold a foot of it to any irrigation company for farmers."

Ross Culver continued to smile amiably. "There isn't any mistake, Mr. Stevens. I don't make mistakes."

Pat settled back on his haunches. His slitted gray eyes bored into the surveyor's face. "There's something wrong," he repeated emphatically. "Do you think I or any of the other ranchers in the valley would be fools enough to sell our creek land to some company to settle farmers on? Why, they'd be putting up fences, blocking our stock off from water, putting a plow to that grassland . . ."

"I'm starting a fencing crew tomorrow," Culver told him quietly. "This is progress, Mr. Stevens. You ranchers can't impede the westward march of civilization. Why, a hundred families can live off one section where you graze a few head of cattle in the winter."

Pat Stevens compressed his lips. "That's plumb foolish talk. This is range land, not farmin' country. You can't raise crops here. Growin' season is too short. An' what would a farmer do with crops if he could raise 'em? It's hundreds of miles to market."

Culver shrugged his shoulders and began to roll up his map. "I'm not an agricultural expert," he confessed. "I'm an engineer and I've been employed to do a job in Powder Valley. When we get our dam built at the source of the creek, and the spring floods impounded in a reservoir . . ."

Pat interrupted him fiercely. "Dam? Reservoir?" He choked over the words. "By God, no! Not as long as there's a gun left in Powder Valley and a man to trigger it."

Ross Culver smiled pityingly. "I'm afraid you're living in the past, Mr. Stevens. Before I came West I heard a

lot about the two-gun desperados I was likely to meet, but I notice the ranchers hereabout seem a peaceful law-abiding lot. None of them go armed any more." He glanced at Pat's gunless hips significantly.

"There's guns aplenty in this valley," Pat assured him. "As you'll be findin' out if you try to put up fences and build dams on our property."

"But it isn't your property any more," the young surveyor argued. "I've seen the recorded deeds to every section I'm surveying."

"I don't know about the others, but I *do* know I haven't sold a section of the Lazy Mare . . ." Pat stopped abruptly. His jaw sagged. He stared at Culver in consternation.

"I did sell a section last winter. But not to any land company. A man named Biloff . . . from down on the Pecos River in Texas, he said he was. Wanted a section to experiment with raisin' hawses. Figgered on breeding Arabians with Morgan stock for cow-hawses, an' figgered to come up here in the high country to give 'em strong hearts and lung capacity while they were growin' up. But he only wanted one section. I sold him that . . . thinkin' it'd be a fine thing to get a better grade of hawses than we mostly get out here."

"Did you say his name was Biloff?"

"That's right. Jud Biloff. Paid me a hundred dollars for the section. I let him have it cheap because he'd put most of his cash money into thoroughbred studs and couldn't afford to pay more."

Ross Culver whistled shrilly. "Six hundred and forty acres for a hundred dollars? You practically gave it to him. I happen to know the company is pricing small tracts at ten dollars an acre . . . and that's before the irrigation system is in. Once we get it under cultivation, it'll be worth fifty dollars an acre easily."

Pat waved his hand with a savage gesture of indif-

ference. "I'm not worrying about that now. I'm wonderin' if Biloff double-crossed me and sold my section to your company."

"I imagine that's what happened," Culver said indifferently. "As a matter of fact, the president of our company is named Biloff. A tall man with black hair and a mustache . . ."

"That's him," Pat said excitedly. He gripped the surveyor's shoulder. "He must have lied to me. All the time he must have been figgering on sellin' it to farmers instead of raisin' hawses. But he knew I wouldn't sell it if he told me the truth . . . so he straight out lied."

Culver shrugged. "Rather smart business."

"Smart, is it?" snarled Pat. His fingers gnawed into the flesh of Culver's shoulder. "I'm bettin' he bought all the rest of this bottom land the same crooked way. Told each one of the ranchers he just wanted their one or two or three sections, without letting on he was buying the rest of it . . . or what he was buyin' it for . . . and ended up with deeds to this whole strip up and down the creek. It's the heart of Powder Valley, that creek is. If we let it get fenced off . . . good God, boy, don't you see what that'll mean to all the ranches that depend on the creek for waterin' their stock?"

Culver shrugged from under Pat's tightly gripping fingers and stepped back. He seemed to grow in stature, and his voice was firm and strong:

"None of these things concern me in the slightest degree. I've been hired to do a job . . . and I intend to see it through."

"Doesn't it matter to you that all this property was bought by trickery?"

Culver shook his head. "Business ethics aren't any concern of mine. In fact, I can't blame Mr. Biloff much under the circumstances. A selfish few ranchers should not be allowed to stand in the way of progress."

Pat Stevens folded his arms and listened with stony calm until the engineer had finished. Then he said quietly, "There'll be shootin' if you try to run your line past that Bar X fence yonder."

Culver laughed indulgently. "I'll take a chance on that."

He bent to pick up his map and stuffed it in his pocket, then folded up his tripod and shouldering it, strode briskly away.

Pat watched him until he reached the group of men gathered about the painted pole. Then he mounted and spurred his horse toward the Bar X ranch in search of John Boyd.

3

JOHN BOYD WAS A TALL, STRINGY MAN with drooping gray mustaches and piercing black eyes. His sixty-five years on the Western range had left him a little stooped and gnarled, but with a rawhide toughness of fiber that disputed the encroachment of advancing years.

Pat Stevens found him at the stables back of the Bar X ranch house wearing a leather blacksmith's apron and sulphurously fitting a shoe on the left hind foot of a blaze-faced bay, one of Boyd's favorite saddle horses.

He glanced up at Pat and jerked out a "Howdy, neighbor," then went on blankety-blanking the struggling horse while he firmly nailed the shoe into place.

Pat dismounted and squatted on the ground, rolling a cigarette and waiting until the rancher was through. It took Boyd only a few minutes, then he stepped back and let the bay get all four feet on the ground again, muttering profanely, "Le's see you throw *that* shoe, you blank son of a blank blank." He pulled out a red bandanna and mopped his sweaty face, brushed his

mustaches up with the back of his hand and spit a long stream of tobacco juice to the ground, then strolled around to squat beside Pat companionably. "Things're lookin' mighty good for this time of year," he offered.

"Mighty good," Pat agreed absently. "I believe my yearlings are carrying twenty pounds more on the average than I ever saw this time before."

"Yep. Price is good, too. I've been thinkin' about getting a couple more bulls, Pat . . ."

"Did you ever think about farming your creek sections?" Pat asked harshly.

"Farming?" John Boyd snorted his aversion. "Here in Powder Valley? Have you gone plumb crazy, Pat? Why would any man farm good grassland? Hell! there's plenty of land out east of here on the flats if a man's got a yen to follow the tail end of a team hooked to a plow."

"That is what I always thought," said Pat. He paused a moment, sucking on his cigarette. "If you think that way, why'd you sell your bottom sections to an outfit that plans on bringin' in farmers an' cuttin' it up into little tracts for nesters-like?"

"You're crazy!" Boyd ejaculated. He pushed back a floppy gray hat and stared at his neighbor in amazement. "I'd as soon see a gang of rustlers move into Powder Valley as a passel of plowmen."

"I just came from down along the creek where there's a surveyor runnin' a fence line along your bottom sections."

Boyd frowned, then suddenly he slapped his lean thigh and began to laugh. "Don' know where you got that idee about farming. I did sell them three bottom sections to a hawse raiser from Texas last winter. Feller by the name of Biloff. He's got an idee for crossin' Arabian studs with pure bred Morgan mares for a heavier an' faster stock hawse. Sounded good to me, so

I let him have them three sections cheap to get started on."

"Hundred dollars a section?"

"Well, I didn't get that much. He claimed he was short of cash an' I figgered it was sort of a public dooty, maybe, to set up a place like that in Powder Valley. I sold him the three sections for two hundred dollars. He was a mighty slick talker, that man," Boyd concluded reminiscently.

"Nineteen hundred and twenty acres for two hundred dollars," Pat mused savagely. "At ten dollars an acre, that's nineteen thousand an' two hundred dollars if my figurin' is right. A clear profit of nineteen thousand for Mr. Biloff."

"What're you talkin' about? Ten dollars an acre . . . nineteen thousand . . ." sputtered Boyd. "He promised me my pick of the first year's colt crop . . ."

"Sure," said Pat sardonically. "He promised *me* that, too. For sellin' him *my* creek section."

"Yours? You mean to say he bought more'n my three sections?"

"Not only mine," Pat explained harshly, "but everybody's up an' down the creek on both sides. Gave each of us the same song an' dance, I reckon. Told each of us he only wanted *our* one or two or three sections facing the creek . . . I tell you, John, Biloff owns every foot of land on both sides of the creek all the way up an' down Powder Valley."

"Good God'l'mighty!" exclaimed Boyd, not impiously. "He must be figgerin' on raisin' a heap of hawses."

"Hawses hell!" snorted Pat. "We've been slickered. We held pat hands an' we threw 'em away in front of a pair of deuces. He lied straight out when he bought that land. Biloff ain't a hawse raiser from Texas. He's the president of a big company that's fixing to dam up Powder Creek an' dig irrigation canals and sell off that land in little parcels to farmers from the East."

"Do tell?" Boyd looked interested but not particularly worried. He shook his head and spit a neat stream of tobacco juice from between his mustaches. "He's crazy if he thinks that'll work. This is cow country. No good for farmin'. Too high in the mountains. Early frost will catch any crop they try to plant."

"That ain't the point," Pat pounded at him. "The farmers that pay ten dollars an acre for that land don't know it's worthless. They'll flock in here and settle all over the bottoms. *Every foot of that creek will be fenced off from our ranches so our stock can't get to water.* With a dam at the upper end, *there won't be any runnin' water* except what the company wants to turn loose."

Boyd shook his head in dazed incomprehension. "I tell you it won't never work," he remonstrated feebly. "Farmers will starve out in a year or two when their crops get froze out."

"*He* don't care whether they raise crops or not. Biloff will clean up a million dollars and leave the farmers holding the bag. While they're starving out, what'll we be doing? Our ranches will be ruined."

"By gum, Pat, you reckon any man could be that mean?" John Boyd asked wonderingly. "Mean enough to get pore devils out here with their families to starve just to make a heap of money off 'em?"

"That's high finance," said Pat sarcastically. "You an' me don't know nothin' about that."

"I don't believe it, Pat. I caint hardly believe such things'd be allowed. There orta be a law."

"I figure," said Pat Stevens quietly, "it's up to us in Powder Valley to see it don't happen here. If there ain't a law to touch a man like Biloff . . . it's time we made some of our own."

A fanatical light began to gleam in John Boyd's black eyes. He nodded his old head slowly. He said solemnly, "I reckon I know one judge that we could appeal to."

"What judge is that?"

"Judge Colt," the old man proclaimed sonorously. "He's always handed down fair an' rightful decisions, Pat, out here in the West." He got to his feet slowly. There was a farseeing look in his eyes. "You say them surveyors are down on the Bar X right now?"

"I just came from there." Pat came to his feet lithely. "We don't want to be too hasty, John. Those surveyors are just doin' the job they've been hired to do. Biloff is the man . . ."

"But Biloff ain't here," John Boyd told him gently. He shook off Pat's restraining hand and stalked toward the back door of the ranch house.

Pat stared after the tall erect figure with a somber look of questioning in his gray eyes. There was going to be hell to pay in Powder Valley. Bloodshed and death were the inevitable components of a situation like this. Pat shrank from the terrible implications that confronted him. This was different from the days when he had carried his guns, loose-triggered, against outlaws and killers. In this case, it would be the innocent who would suffer and die. The farmers who came to the valley would be innocent and deluded victims of one man's greed. There would be women and children—

And those surveyors down by the creek! They were not actually guilty of any wrongdoing. In one blinding flash of comprehension, Pat Stevens foresaw the awful and tragic consequences stalking the peaceful valley. How did a man know what was right and what was wrong? Yet, it would be doing the farmers no favor to let them come and take the bitter consequences that inevitably awaited their coming. Anything would be better than that.

He slowly followed John Boyd to the house.

As he neared the back door he heard the rancher speaking harshly inside, "Give it to me, Martha. Hand it over, I say."

Pat pushed the door open and stepped inside a screened-in porch opening onto the kitchen and rear bedroom. The bedroom door was open. John Boyd stood in the center of the room, his mustaches bristling, one hand outstretched toward his wife. The aged rancher had a cartridge belt strapped about his waist. It was an old belt, dusty with disuse and cracked with age. The brass cylinders gleamed dully in their leather loops. The fancy holster with a steer's head carved in relief was empty.

Martha Boyd stood back against the bedroon wall. One thin hand clutched the ivory butt of a .45, holding the weapon pressed down against a fold of her skirt. Mrs. Boyd was a little woman with silvery hair and gentle features. She had mothered a brood of hulking sons and sent them out into the world, had lived through more than half a century of the pioneer West when it was young and turbulent.

Now her lips were tightly compressed and she shook her head with stubborn finality. "I'll do nothing of the sort, John Boyd. You climb down off your high horse and tell me what's got into you. Coming in here swaggering and blaspheming, grabbing your old gun like you aimed to go on the warpath against the Apaches. I've seen enough trouble made by guns. I'm sick and tired of it."

"Mrs. Boyd is right," Pat said from the doorway. "There must be some other way, John."

Boyd turned, shaking his head. "I found out long ago that arguments aren't much good unless a man's got somethin' more than words to back up his play. Hand over my gun, Martha."

"What's this about, Pat Stevens?" Martha Boyd turned on him like an enraged bantam hen. "What do you mean coming over here and getting John all wrought-up? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Pat said, "I'm sorry. I agree with you that guns aren't the answer." Swiftly he sketched for the little old lady the salient facts of the situation confronting them. "I don't blame John for going hog-wild," he ended quietly. "But killing a surveyor is only going to start worse trouble, John. I've got a better idea."

"You'd better have," Martha Boyd snapped. "The very idea. You both are old enough to know better than to start shooting at the drop of a hat. You unbuckle that belt, John, and listen to Pat."

"What do you figger on doing?" Boyd asked, reluctantly unbuckling the heavy silver clasp.

"We'll ride down and pull up all the stakes they've set along your land. That'll give them something to start thinkin' about. Soon as they find out what they're up against in Powder Valley, they'll more than likely give it up as a bad job and clear out."

"That's more like it," Martha Boyd applauded. "Goodness knows, we can't take a thing like that lying down but there's more ways than one of skinning a skunk."

"Well, all right." Boyd tossed his gun belt down, but he glared angrily at his wife. "We'll try that and see what happens, but I'm warnin' you, Martha, if it comes to shootin', *I'm* not going to be on the receiving end of lead." He strode out to the corral and saddled up a horse, then he and Pat galloped to the south boundary line of the Bar X and began following the section line run by the surveying crew that day.

The surveyor's stakes were square wooden pegs about two feet long that had been driven into the ground about halfway so they were clearly visible above the carpet of fresh green grass.

The two ranchers found they were easily pulled out by dropping the loop of a lariat over them and riding away with the other end of the rope tied to the saddle

horn. The stakes appeared to be set at quarter-mile intervals, and it took them less than half an hour to completely undo the painstaking work that had taken Ross Culver a full day.

They caught up with the surveying crew just before sundown at the boundary line between the Bar X and the Lazy Mare ranches. Culver had his transit set over the last stake a quarter of a mile from the section line, and he was sighting the painted pole in the hands of the man ahead when Pat and Boyd rode up behind him.

They stopped their horses and waited grimly until he gave the okay signal over his head. He stepped away from the tripod and cupped his hands to shout to his men, "All right. Set that stake and we'll knock off for the night."

"Goin' on across the Lazy Mare tomorrow, I reckon?" Pat asked from behind him.

Ross Culver turned and faced him levelly. "Those are my intentions."

Pat was idly coiling up his trailing lariat. He jerked his head toward his companion. "This here's John Boyd."

Before Culver could reply, Boyd demanded angrily, "What right have you got to set that dingus of yours on my land?"

Culver shrugged and glanced at his three-legged instrument leveled over the line stake. "There's only one leg of it touching your property, Mr. Boyd. That stake is the dividing line."

"Well, get that one leg off," bellowed Boyd.

Pat was idly making a small loop, puckering his lips into a tuneless whistle. Culver hesitated a moment and a flush reddened his sunburnt face, then he lifted the instrument and set it aside, saying icily, "All right. This is company property on this side of the stake."

"Is it?" Pat asked with interest. He tossed his loop

over the protruding stake and spurred his horse. The animal lunged forward and the rope snatched the stake from the ground. Pat galloped on toward the group of men ahead. He had another small loop spread out when he reached them. They scattered from around the stake like a covey of quail scattering in front of a coyote.

Without slacking speed, he roped the last stake and galloped back to Culver with it bouncing along at the end of his rope. He reined up beside Boyd and grinned, drawling, "It's a heap easier for us to pull 'em out than it is for you to set them."

The color receded from the surveyor's face. "Do you know what you've done?" he demanded. "Pulling up those two stakes means that I'll have to go back a quarter of a mile in the morning and do this work all over."

"You'll have to go back more'n a quarter of a mile to find a stake to start from," chortled Boyd. "We just finished pulling up every damn one you set on my ranch."

Culver's eyes blazed. His voice was low and unsteady as he expostulated, "That's a full day's work for four men ruined."

"Not only that," said John Boyd cheerfully, "but I figger on pullin' 'em up hereafter as fast as you set 'em in the ground."

Culver took a step forward with clenched fists. "If you weren't old enough to be my father," he said furiously, "I'd pull you off that horse and beat you to a pulp."

"I ain't old enough to be your father," said Pat Stevens. "No, John," to Boyd who had exploded with a burst of profanity and started to swing out of the saddle, "let me handle this." He leaped to the ground and strode toward Culver, inviting him in a mild tone, "Let's see just how tough you are."

They were about of a height as they faced each other, with Culver's few years' advantage in youth counter-

balanced by Pat's greater width of shoulders and ten or fifteen pounds in weight.

"Wait," Culver panted through clenched teeth. "Fighting never helped anything. I don't want . . ."

"You asked for it," Pat told him grimly. He took an awkward fighter's stance with both fists out in front of him and drove a furious right at the young man's jaw.

Ross Culver's jaw wasn't there when Pat's fist arrived. He weaved aside, backing away alertly in a curious sort of shuffle that kept his left foot always in advance of his right with his weight scientifically balanced on the ball of his right foot.

Pat would have been warned if he had known anything about the science of boxing that he faced an opponent who knew at least the elements of ring strategy. But all Pat knew about boxing was to wade in with both fists and try to knock his antagonist's head off. Every time he swung he'd throw himself half off balance and leave himself wide open for a flicking left fist which darted in like a striking snake.

It was annoying at first. The flicking lefts did little real damage. Pat could scarcely feel them as they struck. But his breath was getting shorter and shorter as he followed Culver about swinging wildly, and soon he realized that he was wincing each time a left landed. And his face was wet, too. He thought it was sweat until he saw the blood on Culver's fists. He was being neatly cut to ribbons without landing a single blow of his own.

From behind him he could dimly hear John Boyd hoarsely shouting encouragement to him, and he was dimly conscious that the other members of the surveying crew had come running up to form a loose circle, but he was becoming weaker and weaker, and for the first time in his life Pat knew he was up against something he could not whip.

His pride and the driving anger inside him would not

let him quit, and he floundered on after his elusive opponent, swinging more and more wildly, until he suddenly tripped over his spurs and went down flat on his face.

He instinctively covered his head as he lay th because the rough and tumble rules of barroom figh such as Pat knew ordained that when a man went d he got the boots from his opponent.

Nothing like that happened, and finally from a g distance Pat heard a cold voice saying, "Have you l enough, or are you going to get up and give me pleasure of beating you to more of a pulp than you already?"

Pat found strength to roll over, and he lay th gasping for breath. Through blood-misted eyes he sa John Boyd futilely struggling with two of the crew t come to his assistance, and the air was sulphurous with the old man's curses.

Slowly, Pat staggered to his feet. He stood spread-legged, swaying, his face dripping blood from a dozen cuts inflicted by Culver's knuckles.

He managed, somehow, to stretch his lips into a painful grin. "I got enough . . . for this time," he said thickly. "But there'll be another time, Culver. This is only . . . the beginnin'."

4

DEEP TWILIGHT LAY UPON POWDER Valley when John Boyd reached the Lazy Mare ranch leading Pat's horse. Pat's eyes were swollen to tiny blood-crusted slits, rendering him practically blind, and helpless to do anything except sit in the saddle and be guided home.

Sally Stevens came to the front door of the comfortable ranch house as the two men rode into the yard

acklighted against the yellow glow of a kerosene lamp, ly looked trim and youthful after ten years of mar- e and nine years of motherhood. There was still enough for her to recognize the figure of their X neighbor, though not enough for her to realize husband's condition. She called out gaily:

'ou're just in time for supper, Mr. Boyd. Sage he dumplings."

Sounds mighty good, Sally." Boyd tried to make his ce sound hearty and cheerful, but the effort was a erable failure. He stopped the horses ten feet from door and swung out of the saddle.

ally's heart gave a great leap and began to pound as ough it would tear itself out of her breast when she aw that Pat sat laxly, swaying in the saddle with both hands gripping the horn. She ran down the steps and a little breathless cry of hurt and horror escaped her lips when she was close enough to see his face.

"Now, now, Sally," John Boyd said hastily, catching her arm and drawing her back. "Don't you take on over Pat. I'll have him inside in a jiffy. You get some hot water."

Sally pulled herself away from him and flung her body against Pat's horse, crying piteously, "Pat! What's happened to you?"

Pat tried to smile but his blood-smeared features didn't react very well. He loosened one hand from the horn and awkwardly groped downward until it encountered her soft curling hair. He muttered, "I'm all in one piece, honey. It's just this blood. When you get it washed off . . ."

"That's right," Boyd soothed her. He drew her aside gently, reached up a gnarled hand to take hold of Pat's. "Step down, fella," he directed cheerfully. "And," to Sally, "better get that hot water."

True to her frontier training, Sally wasted no more

time in idle questions. She flew inside and back to t kitchen, hurried into the living room with a basin o steaming water and soft cloths as Boyd came in, supporting and guiding Pat.

"Here. In this deep chair by the fireplace. He can re his head back . . ."

"You'll get the floor all bloody and wet," Pat p tested in a mumble through cracked lips. "Better . .

"Sit him down in that chair, John," Sally direct with crisp competence. "Blood and water will wash u Here, lay his head back like this . . ." She knelt besi the reclining chair and sopped a cloth in the hot wat wrung it out and tested it anxiously against her ow cheek, then with forced calm began cleansing the drie blood from Pat's terribly cut and swollen face.

John Boyd stepped back, looking uncomfortable an worried, undecided whether he should stay or go. You never could tell about women, he reflected. Sally was calm enough now, while she had a definite job for her hands to do, but as soon as she got Pat fixed up she was going to be demanding an explanation—and that wasn't going to be easy because Boyd blamed himself for the whole thing. The incident had occurred on his land. It had been his fight, not Pat's. *He* was the one who should be beat up instead of Pat. Yet, here he was without a scratch on him. He wouldn't blame Sally, he thought dolefully, if she turned on him after learning the truth and scratched his eyes out.

Pounding footsteps sounded from the kitchen. Li a young cyclone, Pat's nine-year-old son Dock came da ing into the room. He slithered to a stop on a tann coyote skin, and his young eyes became big and rou with amazement as they fixed themselves on the ghas condition of his father's face.

"Gee whillikers," he breathed in an awed tone. "Loo like you tangled with a passel of wildcats, Dad, a come off second-best."

"You stand back and be quiet, Dock," Sally ordered her young son sharply over her shoulder. "I guess your father knows how he looks without any remarks from you."

John Boyd cleared his throat. He thought this would be a good chance to make an explanation without speaking directly to Sally. He laid his hand on the lad's shoulder and said:

"Your daddy jumped into a fight to save me from gettin' beat up, Dock. 'Twas all my fault."

"Gosh! I bet the other guy looks worse'n Dad," Dock said loyally. "I guess Dad's about the best fighter in Powder Valley."

Boyd cleared his throat uncomfortably. From the set of Sally's shoulders he knew she wasn't missing a word of the conversation behind her. "It wasn't a fair fight," Boyd said angrily. "Pat never even got to hit him. Not once. The other fellow wouldn't stand up an' take it. He kep' backing away an' dodging like one of them fancy box-fighters that get up in a ring with leather bags on their hands. It's only a coward an' a sneak that fights that way, Dock."

The lad's face grew rigid and angry. "Who was it?" he panted. "You jest tell me who it was an' I'll get even with him."

"Dock," his mother chided sharply, but John Boyd smiled down into the boy's face and shook his head. "'Twasn't anyone you know, son. A dude from the East. One of them surveyor fellows that're figgerin' on cutting Powder Valley up into little farms with barbed fences and mule teams to pull their plows."

He glanced aside to see that Sally was listening, went on with growing harshness, "They tricked us ranchers into sellin' out the bottom land all along the creek an' now they're going to dam it up for irrigation water. Our Daddy an' me was sorta arguin' the p'int with the surveyor an' he got mad 'cause we pulled up some of

his silly stakes. He got your dad fightin' mad; then, like I say, he backed away an' wouldn't stand up like a man."

Dock Stevens eeled away from Boyd's restraining hand. He panted, "They can't do that to my dad," and darted from the room.

"Do you mean what you just said?" Sally asked in a low, anxious tone.

"You bet I mean it. Mistake was . . . Pat wouldn't let me go after 'em with my gun. So that's what happened." Boyd made a savage gesture toward Pat. "I'll see that mistake ain't repeated."

"Dock! Where are you going?" Sally cried out in sudden alarm, turning her head to look past the rancher.

"Jest . . . out."

Boyd turned in time to see the youngster dart out the front door. He had donned his leather jacket and hat, and carried a .22 rifle over his shoulder.

"Stop him, John," Sally cried frantically. "He doesn't know what he's doing. He's likely to . . ."

Without waiting to hear more, Boyd ran to the window near the door. In the last glimmer of fading daylight, he saw the small figure starting to climb into his father's saddle.

Boyd trotted into the yard, roaring, "Wait, Dock. You crazy little cuss, you can't . . ."

He made a lunge and caught the horse's bridle just as Dock wheeled the animal away.

"You let go," Dock sobbed. "Lemme go. I'll show 'em they can't do that to Dad . . . nor to Powder Valley neither."

"You get down off that hawse an' listen to me." Boyd reached up and caught the lad's belt, pulled him down and shook him angrily. "You get back into the house to your ma. She's got trouble enough without worryin' her pretty head about you. I told you it was my fight . . . and I'm aimin' to end it my way. Promise me, now, that

you won't get no more fool idees." He gave the boy another shake.

"Well . . . all right . . . I promise," Dock Stevens agreed reluctantly. "But if I was jest a little bigger, I'd ride with you an' nobody would stop me."

"When you get a little bigger, nobody'll try to stop you," Boyd growled. He gave the lad a shove toward the house, waited until he slouched inside defiantly, then mounted his own horse and rode away toward the Bar X.

Three hours later Sally Stevens sat in a rocking chair before a crackling fire of piñon logs in the fireplace. Her young face was unwontedly grave and the dancing flames did not strike sparkling reflections from her eyes. She was patching one of Dock's shirts, and her fingers plied the needle nimbly though she was scarcely conscious of what she did.

Pat sat in his deep chair at the opposite corner of the fireplace. Constant application of cloths wrung out from ice-cold spring water had reduced most of the swelling, but his face was still a mass of livid bruises and cuts inflicted by Ross Culver's hard knuckles. Pat's voice was grave and deep-toned as he explained to Sally:

"That's what we're up against, honey. Jumpin' in and fightin' with my fists was plumb foolish for a grown man. I admit it. But we're going to have to fight for Powder Valley, Sally . . . every way we know how."

"There must be some better way than fighting," she cried fearfully. "But that's all men ever think of. Look at you. That's just a sample. Next time it'll be bullets. I thought . . . we were done with bullets in Powder Valley."

"We've got to keep the farmers out," Pat argued. "It's for their sake as well as ours. Lots of them will put every

cent they've got into a little farm here. They won't be able to move after they learn they've been tricked an' can't raise crops. There'll be women and children . . . hungry. You know what that means. When a man's family is hungry he's ready to do anything. Our calves'll be slaughtered . . . I tell you there'll be hell to pay, Sally."

"But surely they'll know better than to think they can come up into the mountains to farm. As soon as they see how things are . . ."

"But they won't see until they've already spent their money and moved out here," Pat pointed out somberly. "A man that's slick with words like Biloff will make Powder Valley sound like a slice of heaven to them farmers in the East. They'll come crowdin' in . . . hopeful and broke . . ." Pat shook his head sadly. "We got to stop it before it gets started."

As he ceased speaking the sound of a trotting horse approaching the ranch came to them both. Pat turned his head slowly to listen. Sally tensed and her fingers stopped their work. She knew a sudden feeling of suffocation. It had come to that already. The sound of a horse in the night was enough to send a stab of uncertainty through them both. Like the old days when every rider might be an enemy—when Pat had slept with his guns within easy reach and had never struck a light when answering a night summons.

Sally felt her heart constrict with fear as the ridden horse stopped outside. She didn't think she could stand to go through a period like that again. She began a little wordless prayer, stopped it when a loud knock sounded on the door.

Without moving from his chair, Pat Stevens called curtly, "Come in."

Sally's breath stopped as the door opened. She didn't start breathing again until she recognized Sheriff Ed Grimes.

She jumped to her feet with a smile of welcome and cried gaily, "I'm certainly glad to see *you,* Sheriff. What brings you out to the Lazy Mare at this time of night?"

Sheriff Grimes was a heavy man, with dark strong features. A fair man, and completely without fear, he was a close friend of Pat's who had campaigned for him throughout the county at the last election.

He took off his hat slowly and nodded to Sally, but without an answering smile. "Good evening to you, Miz Stevens. I come out to have a word with Pat."

Pat was studying the sheriff queerly, with a crooked smile twisting his bruised lips. "Draw up a chair, Ed. I'm in a mood for listenin'."

The sheriff strode forward hesitantly, clearing his throat and glancing at Sally. "It's a man-talk," he muttered defensively.

Sally smiled sweetly and seated herself in her chair, took up her sewing again. "Then I won't interfere, Sheriff. Go right ahead. I won't mind one bit."

The sheriff stepped onto the hearth and teetered back and forth on the high heels of his boots, spreading his hands out to the flames. Without looking at Pat, he said, "I had to arrest John Boyd tonight."

Pat's gaze became guarded and remote. He didn't say anything. Sally looked down and was surprised to see that her fingers were working away steadily, though she felt numb and unable to direct them.

"The danged old coot," Sheriff Grimes sputtered. "Come high-tailin' it into Dutch Springs with that fancy-butted six-gun of his strapped around his spindlin' belly an' breathin' fire outta both nostrils. Ravin' about how you'd got yore manly beauty all disfigured in a fist fight an' how it was up to him to git the man that did it. I'm admittin' you ain't looking so purty," the sheriff went on with a level look at Pat's countenance. "But losin' what beauty you had ain't worth a killin'."

"There's more to it than that," Pat muttered.

Grimes started to stride back and forth in front of the fireplace, gnawing his underlip and shaking his head. "I'm the duly elected sheriff of this here county," he burst out, as though it was a point he had been arguing with himself. "You an' John Boyd an' all the rest of the ranchers put me in office to keep the peace. The minute I start doin' my dooty, all of you jump on me like a ton of brick."

"What happened when you arrested Boyd?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. He'd passed the word around about them surveyors from Denver an' some wild story about them planning to dam up the crick and settle farmers in the bottoms. I grabbed him when he started out gunnin' for that Ross Culver man. Danged if I'd more'n got John to the jail before the whole dang county was threatenin' to tear it down and get him out. Yet they call themselves law-abidin' citizens." The sheriff snorted his disgust loudly.

Pat chuckled and asked, "How'd it all come out?"

"It ended with me takin' John's gun an' putting him under a five-hundred dollar peace bond," snapped the sheriff. "And I aim to do the same with you, Pat Stevens, less'n you'll give me yore word you won't interfere no more with them surveyors in their work."

Pat shook his head slowly. "No man ever took my gun while I was conscious."

"All I ask is yore word not to start trouble," pleaded the sheriff.

"What am I supposed to do when they start surveyin' off my creek section?" asked Pat coldly. "Get down on my knees an' beg 'em to please not do it?"

"But it ain't yore crick section no more, the way I understand it. You sold that section, Pat. You ain't got no more claim to it."

"Do you know how I was tricked into sellin' it?"

"That ain't either here nor there. You sold it. Another

man owns it legal. Accordin' to law, he's got a right to survey it an' fence it."

"So you're siding with a bunch of crooks?" Pat asked scornfully.

"I ain't sidin' with nobody," snapped the exasperated sheriff. "It's my job to see the law's obeyed." He paused, then asked slowly, "Do you know it's a thousand-dollar fine or six months in jail . . . or both . . . for maliciously pullin' up section stakes set out by a surveyor?"

Pat frowned and shook his head. "No. I sure didn't know about that."

"I didn't know it till tonight. Culver showed me in a book of Colorado laws he's got with him. That's what both you an' John Boyd are liable to for that stunt you pulled this afternoon."

"I reckon Culver's going to swear out a complaint against us?"

"No." The sheriff shook his head solemnly. "He said he didn't want to do that. He's a right nice feller, Pat. He's hired to do a job, an' he figgers on doin' it. He ain't carrying no hard feelin's for what happened this afternoon. But, like he says, he can't afford to keep on settin' stakes an' havin' 'em pulled up. So, if it happens again he swears he'll have the law on you."

"And you're backing his play?" asked Pat slowly.

"I ain't backin' neither his play nor yores. I'm sheriff and it's my job to see the law's obeyed like it's writ on the books. If Culver breaks a law I'll slap him in jail as fast or faster'n I would you."

"But it's not breakin' a law to steal a man's land and dam off the cattle water he needs?" Pat asked sarcastically. "It's legal, I reckon, to sell that land for ten or twenty times what was paid for it to poor devils who'll come out here with their families to starve while they try to raise crops. You're going to stand up for a man that figgers on ruining this valley?"

"I don't know of any law that's been broke," asseverated the sheriff doggedly. "If you can show me one I'll shore be proud to slap Culver and his gang in jail."

"Maybe there isn't any law covering it," Pat argued angrily. "But that doesn't make it right, Ed. You're a cowman. You know what a dam in Powder creek will mean to this valley."

"But I'm the sheriff, too," said Grimes helplessly. "I'm bound by my oath on the Bible to uphold the law."

"You're crazy. You can't set yourself against every man in the valley. Maybe you can arrest two or three of us. But that won't do any good. We'll whip you, Ed. You know you can't stand up to us."

"That's threatenin' an officer of the law," Grimes said heavily.

"Call it what you want, it won't help you any."

"I was afraid you'd take it this way, Pat. I'll have to warn you . . . I'm deputizin' Ross Culver and all his men. The law's on their side, the way I see it."

"Good God, Ed! Deputizing Culver's men? That means killing . . . lots of it."

"I can't help it, Pat. My dooty's plain. If I don't do it, Culver threatened to send word to Denver to have the United States Marshal come down. You know what that means. Government troops . . . martial law, maybe. You can't fight a big company like that, Pat. Don't you see you can't?"

Pat Stevens' eyes blazed with anger. "I've fought worse than that in the past. You're a fool, Ed, to think we'll ever back down."

The sheriff stopped his pacing and drew himself up with a queer assumption of dignity. "I'll repeat what I said when I first came out. Either give me yore word you'll leave them surveyors alone . . . or I'll take yore gun and put you under a peace bond like I did John Boyd."

"I warn you," said Pat heavily. "Don't push me too far."

"You mean you won't give me yore word?"

"No."

"I'm sorry. You'll have to get yore coat and ride to town with me. It's my sworn dooty to hold you till you make bond."

Pat said quietly, "You'll have to arrest me, Ed."

"I don't want to do that. If you'll ride along peaceable . . ."

"Which I won't," snapped Pat.

The sheriff sighed regretfully. "You always were a stubborn cuss. But I'm stubborn, too." He drew a pair of shiny handcuffs from his pocket and dangled them in front of Pat. "I never thought I'd be fittin' this kind of jewelry on you."

Sally's sewing slid from her lap to the floor as she sprang to her feet. Her face was flushed and her eyes blazed. With one swift movement she placed herself in front of Pat and faced the sheriff.

"If you lay a hand on him you'll regret it, Ed Grimes. He's not leaving this house tonight. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Well . . . I . . ." The sheriff got out a bandanna and mopped sweat from his face.

"You should be. After all Pat's done for this valley." Sally's voice broke for a moment, then it became taut and hard again. "You get on out the door and don't come back until you're ready to apologize."

The sheriff hesitated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Well, I . . . I reckon maybe Pat is too sick to be took out tonight," he agreed with relief plainly evident in his voice. He backed away. "I . . . I guess I'll be going."

Neither Pat nor Sally answered him. He blundered his way to the door where he paused unhappily, then

turned and went out. A moment later they heard the pound of his horse's hoofs as he spurred away from the ranch.

Sally stood quite still for a moment. Then she collapsed across Pat's chair, sobbing as though her heart would break.

He looked down gravely at the bright blond head pressed against his chest and remonstrated, "Shucks, now, old woman. This ain't any way for a fightin' female to be actin'."

She sobbed, "I'm so . . . so *ashamed*, Pat."

He grinned wryly, his fingers toying with the silky tendrils of hair at the nape of her neck. "Ashamed of what, honey? Me, I was right proud of the way you stood up to Ed Grimes."

"Ashamed of the way I felt. And *afraid*," Sally wailed. She twisted to turn her tear-wet face up to his. "It frightens me to find out I have that sort of thing inside of me. I . . . why, I was ready to do anything, Pat. If I'd had my hands on a gun . . ." Her voice trailed off into an awed whisper.

Pat bent his head to touch his bruised lips to her damp cheek. He said gruffly, "Reminds me of a time ten years ago when you stood alongside me and traded lead with John Stout's gang of outlaws. I fell in love with you that day," he concluded reminiscently, "an' now I reckon I'm fallin' in love with you all over again."

Sally sighed and stirred uneasily in his arms. "This is different, Pat. Those other men were killers. We were fighting for peace and security in Powder Valley. The right to settle here and raise a family in decent surroundings."

"We're fighting for the same thing this time," Pat told her grimly. "Jud Biloff and his land company is a worse menace to Powder Valley than John Stout was."

"But they've got the law on their side this time. Ed Grimes and those surveyors . . . *they're* right, too. When we turn against the law, *we* become the outlaws."

"I recollect a similar occasion when we were fightin' Stout. Looked like *he* had the law on his side for a time. But you stayed with me, Sally. You rode off beside me when it looked like we were headed for the owl-hoot trail sure."

"I'd do it again, Pat," she told him fiercely, "but . . ."

"Don't be frettin' yourself too much. What's *right* has a way of bein' bigger than man-made laws when it comes right down to it. We're in the right in this fight . . . an' that's what really counts."

The sound of ridden horses through the night again brought Sally up, tense and frightened. Pat's hand tightened on her shoulder comfortingly. "Two of 'em this time," he announced. "I wouldn't worry about Grimes coming back tonight . . . not after the way you stood him off."

These riders were in a hurry. They galloped up swiftly, and boot heels thudded as the horses stopped outside. Sally sprang up from her undignified position in Pat's lap and hastily wiped away the stains left by her recent tears. There was a knock on the door, but it was thrown open before she could reach it.

Her eyes lighted happily when she saw the two men who came tramping in unceremoniously. They were Sam Sloan and Ezra, Pat's two gun-partners from long ago, settled now on a ranch at the south end of the valley where they had put away their guns and turned to peaceful pursuits after Pat married Sally and took over the Lazy Mare ranch.

But they wore their guns tonight. That was the first thing Sally noticed when they came through the door. Sam Sloan was in the lead. A small, dark-featured man, there was an air of devil-may-care assurance about him

as he stalked forward followed by the huge and terrifying figure of Ezra with his scarred face and his one good eye, who had the strength of a range bull in his mighty frame, with a placid temperament that was slow to anger yet awful when aroused.

They stopped short in front of Sally, and Sam removed his hat with an exaggerated gesture of deference. He drawled, "Howdy, ma'am. We hear *yo're* wearin' the pants in the Stevens family tonight. Mighty lucky thing for yore shrinkin' violet of a husban' yonder he's still got you to fight his battles."

Sally smiled feebly. She was accustomed to Sam and Ezra's rough witticisms and knew that their roughest insults to each other covered a deep regard that was as near to love as strong men can feel for each other. She said, "I suppose . . . you know what's happened."

"We got Sheriff Grimes' side of the story down the road a piece," Sam told her happily. "Plumb disgustin' the way you females nowadays take the play away from menfolks. Ezra an' me formed a rescue party an' helled it out here when we heard in town the sheriff was figgerin' on arrestin' Pat, an' danged if you didn't spoil ever'thing by sendin' him scootin' away like a houn' dawg that's bin turpentined."

He moved past Sally to stand in front of Pat, his black eyes sparkling with malicious merriment. He cocked his head on one side and surveyed his old friend's marred face with complete enjoyment, then drawled, "Looks like you tangled with a threshin' machine instead of a boy scout in knee-high boots. What were you doin' while he worked you over thataway?"

Ezra followed him across the room, his one eye becoming big and round as he took in Pat's appearance. "They told us in town you jest fought with *one* man," he ejaculated. "Looks from here like a troop of cavalry had trompled yore face."

"Looks like Pat never will get a lick of sense in that thick haid of his'n." Sam shook his own head lugubriously. "I seen Ross Culver in town afore we come out. Shucks, Pat, he looks nigh as tough as a fresh-sprouted rosebud. You ought to've knowed better than to tackle him without some help like Dock, mebbe, to back up yore play."

Pat grinned wryly and waved a hand at them to sit down. "When you get through with your jokes that ain't funny, tell me how things're shaping in Dutch Springs."

"There's hell to pay," Sam Sloan told him succinctly. "Grimes has swore in those surveyors as deputy sheriffs an' he swears he'll call in the State militia if anybody starts trouble. There's gonna be shootin' an' plenty of it unless somethin' happens quick. Like old times," he ended happily, subconsciously dropping a wiry hand to caress the worn butt of a .45 swinging low at his right hip.

"I reckon folks have found out how we've been tricked?" Pat asked.

"Yep. Word's got around fast." Sam paused to draw in a deep breath and admitted uncomfortably, "Ezra an' me got hooked along with the others."

"You an' Ezra? I thought your ranch would be so high above the creek they wouldn't want it."

"They wanted two sections real bad," Sam told him grimly. "Them upper end sections of ours is where they figger on buildin' their dam. Across the lower end of our colt pasture. That'll make a lake a couple of miles long and near a mile wide . . . *if* an' *when* they get their dam built," he ended with significant emphasis.

Pat shook his head. "That's bad. I'd hoped maybe they hadn't bought their damsite yet."

"They bought her all right. Man by the name of Biloff come around to us last winter an' spun us a song about raisin' blooded hawses on those two sections.

Promised us the use of his Arabian studs to build up *our* herd," Sam ended disgustedly, "an' we fell for it, hook, line an' *sinker.*"

"If they build the dam," said Pat harshly, "Powder Valley is ruined for cow country. We might as well all move out."

"I don't reckon they'll build it," drawled Sam. His fingers touched his gun butt again. "And *I* don't aim to make the mistake of fightin' with my fists. Lead talks louder."

Pat nodded his head slowly. His battered features became a grim mask that hid his inner feelings. "But we've got to go slow," he warned. "We can't afford to get the militia called in. We've got to make 'em think we're takin' it lyin' down."

Sam looked disappointed. "Shucks. What I say is let's run them surveyors off right now . . ."

"They'll just send in more. No." Pat's eyes were bright now as a plan shaped itself in his mind. "Here's what we've got to do. Sit down and listen to me . . . then start ridin' through the valley telling all the ranchers. It's the *only* way we can beat this thing without startin' a civil war."

Sam and Ezra nodded solemnly and drew up chairs for a conclave that was to be the beginning of a history-making epoch in the West. They knew Pat Stevens' capacity for leadership, his ability to think things through and lay a plan of campaign that had a chance to succeed. They and the other valley ranchers would be willing to listen to Pat's counsel up to a certain point. Beyond that . . . well, that was in the lap of the capricious gods.

5

SALLY STEVENS WAS INSIDE THE GENERAL store in Dutch Springs, ordering a list of groceries to take back to the Lazy Mare ranch, when the covered wagon stopped in front. It was late afternoon and the sun was low in the west, streaming through the dusty plate glass windows in front.

The ungainly, canvas-covered top of the prairie schooner blotted out the sunlight when it stopped in front of the store. Sally squinted down at the penciled list on the counter, suddenly thrown into darkness by the shadow of the covered wagon.

She couldn't make out the next item on her list, and she glanced behind her through the dusty window at the rickety old wagon outside. Two hungry-looking horses stood with drooped heads in the traces. They were so thin that Sally could see the stark outlines of their ribs from where she stood. A tall man, wearing faded overalls and a tattered straw hat, was handing over the lines to a sunbonneted woman who sat beside him on the high spring seat. A ragged-looking milk goat was tethered behind the wagon, and the dirty faces of three towheaded children peered around the back of the canvas top.

Sally Stevens felt a queer tightening of her throat muscles, a premonitory twinge of worry as she stared out at the strange-looking vehicle. It was the first prairie schooner she had seen for many years. Dutch Springs wasn't on any through route from the east to California. Anyone coming here . . . well, they were coming *here*

The tall, straw-hatted man was entering the store. Sally turned her gaze away from him and hastily scanned her list again. She said, "Ten pounds of sugar and three

pounds of Arbuckle's coffee," in a clear, crisp voice.

The storekeeper turned away to get the items from his shelves. Sally was conscious of a tall figure who approached and stood beside her. She kept her eyes turned away from the intruder, studied her list and went on briskly, "and I need some salt pork, too, Mr. Winters."

The man who stood beside her cleared his throat diffidently. The smell of man-sweat came from his angular body. Sally kept her eyes turned away from him. She heard a child's bare feet pattering into the store behind her, then a childish treble saying, "Mommy says get some 'lasses, too. A little can . . . if it don't cost too much."

Despite her resolution, Sally turned her head and looked at the little girl who stood at the counter beside her. Mary Hartsell was just about the age of Dock. She met Sally's gaze with a timid smile and confided, "We've come an awful long ways but we're almost there now. Mommy says everything will be nice when we get settled in our new home. We're going to *like* it here."

Sally heard herself saying, "I hope you do." Mr. Winters brought some sacks and set them on the counter in front of her. Sally studied her list again. It was blurred so she couldn't read the next items. Or, perhaps her eyes were blurred with tears. She moved aside a step and suggested, "Suppose you wait on this other customer, Mr. Winters. I don't seem to be able to read what I've got written."

The storekeeper was a bald man, with a fat paunch and a jolly, moonlike face. But he didn't look jolly as he eyed the lank, overalled man in front of him. He asked, "Driving through?" in a voice that was hard with suspicion.

"We'll be driving on a little way, I guess." The lean face of the man from Kansas glowed hopefully. "According to the map I've got, my place will be a couple

of miles north. Have there . . . are there many other settlers ahead of us?"

Mr. Winters leaned forward and rested both elbows on the counter. His hard gaze appraised the tall farmer as he might have looked upon a visitor from Mars. He demanded, "You figure on settling here in Powder Valley?"

"We sure do. My land's bought and paid for." There was a thin note of pride in Hartsell's voice. "We've drove a mighty long road and we're wearied to get settled. Looks like real good farming land to me."

"It ain't."

"Ain't what?"

"No good for farming. You'd best turn right around and go back where you came from."

"We can't do that. We sold out everything when we left. Look here, Mister, how come you say it's no good for farming? I can't see there's ever been a plow put to it."

"There hasn't never been." Winters paused to let his words sink in. "And there ain't never going to be."

Joe Hartsell looked confused and uncertain. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he stammered, "I reckon you're mistaken, Mister. I aim to cultivate my place soon as I get settled."

Winters shrugged and drew back from his position on the counter. He turned his back on the man and girl, asked Sally, "You made out what else is on your list, Mrs. Stevens?"

Sally had been engrossed in the conversation and hadn't been trying to read her list. She said, "You haven't waited on him yet."

"I've got nothing here to sell him." The storekeeper's words were deliberate and harsh. "Let him go out and raise a crop if he's hungry."

"Look here, Mister. I've got to have a list of groceries.

We've used up most everything and I figured on stocking up before I drove out to locate my place."

"You'll do no stocking up here." Winters kept his back turned on the travel-weary man. "We don't want your kind in Powder Valley, and the quicker you find that out and *get* out the better off you'll be."

Sally's heart gave a great leap of pity as she glanced sideways and observed the effect of Winters' blunt speech on the Kansan. Joe Hartsell stiffened as though he had been struck a blow in the face. The little girl pressed close to him, her eyes big and wondering, slowly filling with tears which welled over and made little ditches through the dust on her thin cheeks.

"I guess you can't refuse to sell a man a few groceries," Hartsell said after a moment. "I've got a wife and two more hungry kids out in the wagon. We're out of most everything . . . and they tell me this is the only store around here."

"Don't be sniveling to me about your wife and kids," Winters said impatiently. "We didn't ask you to come here . . . and we don't want you to stay. Now, Mrs. Stevens . . ."

Sally bent her head and looked at her list again. Her eyes were dry and burning. She heard the little girl's frightened whisper, "What's he mad at us for, Pa?"

"I don't know, Mary. But never you mind. We'll make out . . ."

Another voice obtruded from the front of the store, "I declare, Joe, I forgot we were out of corn meal. You'd better get five pounds . . ." It was a woman's voice, lilting and almost gay; with a strained undertone which denied the assumption of gaiety.

Sally turned and saw the sunbonneted woman who had sat on the front seat of the prairie schooner with her husband when it drove up. She looked pitiably thin and undernourished, but there was a sweet look of con-

tentment clinging to her face which told of her happiness at being so near to the end of their long trek.

The little girl scampered across the floor and flung herself against her mother, sobbing wildly, "They're mean people here, Mommy. They won't sell Papa anything. They don't like us."

"Now, now, Mary. There must be some mistake. Of course they'll sell us . . ."

But Joe Hartsell was advancing toward her slowly, shaking his head. "We'd best be driving on, Molly. I'm afraid we're not . . . very welcome here."

"Where can we drive on to? Without a thing to eat in the wagon! You know we planned to buy everything we needed here before we went on to the farm."

"I know we did, Molly." Joe Hartsell's back was to Sally. His voice was low and it throbbed with bewilderment and hurt. "Seems like there's some mistake. We'll figure a way to make out . . ."

"We will not." Molly Hartsell spoke hotly. She pushed past her husband. "I'm not going to see our children go hungry." She approached the counter. "I need some flour and corn meal and a can of baking powder . . . and some side meat . . ."

Mr. Winters kept his back turned as though he were unaware of her presence. He said, "You haven't told me what else, Mrs. Stevens."

"Don't you be treating me like the dirt under your feet." Molly Hartsell's voice was brittle. "We've got money to pay for what we buy. Just as good money as anybody else's."

"That's where you're wrong, ma'am." Mr. Winters turned around to face the outraged mother. "Your money won't buy anything anywhere in Dutch Springs."

"But I . . . don't understand." Molly gripped the counter with thin fingers. Her voice was edged with strain. "We've . . . bought a farm here in the valley. As soon as

we can get settled with some chickens and a cow, get a garden planted, we'll be all right. But we've got to have food right now . . . food that we're willing to pay for . . ."

The storekeeper shook his head. He got out a bandanna to mop his face, averting his gaze from Molly Hartsell's tragic, pleading eyes. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm not a hard man, but it'll save a mighty lot of trouble if you folks turn around now and go back. This is cow country, and we don't cotton to hoemen in Powder Valley." He blew his nose vehemently and turned his back on the Hartsells.

Molly dented her under lip with a row of even white teeth. She turned her stricken gaze slowly toward Sally, swaying a trifle as she clung tightly to the counter for support. "What . . . am I going to do?" she whispered. "Our team needs a rest and grain. We've been on the road for two weeks."

Sally's gaze went beyond the woman to Joe Hartsell, and to Mary, clinging to her father while the tears silently ran down her pinched cheeks.

Sally thought of Dock. Suppose *he* were hungry—among strangers!

She turned back impulsively to Molly Hartsell and gave her a secret smile of encouragment and a nod of her blond head. Aloud, to Mr. Winters, she said, "I can read my list now: Flour and corn meal, and a can of baking powder. And some side meat . . ."

The storekeeper turned about with a slow frown. "I just wrapped you up some salt pork."

"I know, but I want side meat, too. About . . ." She turned and looked inquiringly at Molly. The Kansas woman moved closer. Her eyes were bright with understanding. She smiled shyly and her lips formed the word, "Three."

"About three pounds," Sally told Mr. Winters briskly.

The storekeeper hesitated, but Sally gave him a level,

direct glance. "Set those things out while I study out some more from my list."

When he moved away reluctantly, Sally stepped close to Molly and asked in a low tone, "Do you need anything else?"

"A sack of potatoes and a piece of boiling meat. That's all."

Sally stepped back to the counter and calmly ordered the rest of the things the Hartsells needed. When all the things were set out, Sally directed coolly, "Total these up separately from my other order and put them in a box."

"See here, Sally Stevens." Mr. Winters faced her with his arms akimbo, his red face glowering. "If you're buying this stuff for these trashy nesters . . ."

"I'm buying it," Sally told him icily. "That's enough for you. *My* money has been mighty good in this store for ten years."

"People are going to be plenty mad when they hear about this, Mrs. Stevens. They listened to Pat and let things ride along on his say-so, and you know that this here was his plan . . . that we'd starve 'em out before they got settled . . ."

"Put that order up for me, Mr. Winters," Sally cut in. She took out her purse. "How much is it?"

The amount was slightly over five dollars. Sally paid it, and Mr. Winters accepted the money, trembling with indignation but not quite daring to refuse to make the sale to one of his most important customers. When the transaction was completed, Sally turned to Molly Hartsell with a smile. "Now, I'm going to sell this to you. But . . . take my advice and don't try to stay here in the valley."

"I thank you, ma'am, for getting us the groceries and for the advice. But I don't see what else we can do except stay. We've got nowhere else to go. We sold out everything in Kansas before we started." Molly was counting

out the exact sum Sally had paid for the groceries. Joe Hartsell came forward to lift the box onto his shoulder, saying humbly:

"We don't understand what any of this is about ma'am. We're not aiming to start any trouble. All we want is a chance to farm the land we bought fair and square . . ."

A disturbance outside the store drew their attention. While they had been inside endeavoring to buy the necessities they desperately needed, an ominously silent crowd of cowpunchers and ranchers had gathered about the covered wagon outside. Up and down the main street of Dutch Springs the word had flown that the first of the invading army of hated farmers had reached the valley, and grim-faced men had been drifting down the boardwalk to see what happened when Winters refused to sell them any groceries according to a prearranged plan figured out by Pat Stevens.

Now there was a loud altercation going on in the dusty street at the rear of the wagon. From inside the store, their view was cut off by a close-packed ring of grinning men, but there were shrill exclamations of anger and the sound of blows on bare flesh, and billowing clouds of dust rising above the heads of the watchers.

With a little cry of fear, Molly Hartsell darted out of the store. Sally was close behind her as she forced her way through the ring of grinning men. Two small forms were entwined in the dusty street, a tangle of arms and legs and faces so dirty they were unrecognizable.

Molly Hartsell bent over them, crying, "Joey! Stop it, Joey. Let go! Do you hear me?"

While the ranchers guffawed loudly, Molly caught a flailing arm of her seven-year-old son and dragged him up out of the dust. His nose was bleeding and he was weeping defiantly, trying to pull himself away from his mother to get another whack at his youthful antagonist.

When Sally saw the other small figure dragging him

self up out of the dust, she cried out in shocked reproof, "Dock! Oh, Dock! How could you?"

Dock Stevens' nose was also bleeding, but he was grinning happily. "I guess I showed 'im," he boasted. "Doggone homesteaders comin' in here to steal our ranches."

"Dock! I'm so ashamed," Sally wailed. She caught his shoulder and gave him a shake. "You apologize right now."

"I ain't a-goin' to." Dock hung his head stubbornly. "They ain't got any right to come here."

Over her son's head, Sally's distraught eyes met those of Molly Hartsell. She said, "I'm terribly ashamed that this happened. I hope you'll forgive my son."

Molly laughed shakily. "They're just boys. It doesn't mean a thing." But in her heart Molly knew it did. It was a part of the strange animosity with which they were being greeted in Powder Valley, as inexplicable to her as it was menacing.

The ring of men had self-consciously broken apart as the two mothers separated their offspring, and as they stepped back they spied Joe Hartsell emerging from the store with a box of groceries on his shoulder.

An ominous murmur of anger greeted the sight. Mort Dawson, foreman for the Triangle H, stepped in front of Joe and demanded, "What you got there?"

Joe said, "Groceries." He started to push past Mort. Dawson gave him a shove and he staggered against the front wheel of the wagon. His blue eyes blazed and his mouth set in a tight hard line. He boosted the box of groceries up onto the front seat, then turned to face the group of hostile faces with bunched fists. "I don't know what's up," he began, "but . . ."

Mr. Winters nervously came to the door of his store. "Don't be blaming me for selling him that stuff, boys," he called out placatingly. "I didn't, just like I promised.

Mrs. Stevens ordered it and paid for it . . . then sold it to the plow-outfit . . ."

"I certainly did." Sally pushed her way in front of the men, between them and Joe Hartsell. "You leave these folks alone now. They're tired and worn-out, and they have children . . ."

"Sally!" Pat Stevens came striding up and took Sally's arm angrily. "What's this all about? I was down the street and I heard . . ."

The creak of moving wagon wheels interrupted him. During the diversion created by Sally, Molly Hartsell had hustled her husband and children into the wagon, lifted the lines and started the weary team off down the street.

Sally turned to watch them go. She clung to Pat weakly, her eyes filling with tears. There was something symbolic in the slow, measured pace of the swaying prairie schooner with its cargo of pitiable souls seeking a place to put roots into the ground of this wild and untamed West. The Hartsells were not the type who would be easily dislodged and driven out once they had settled themselves on their own plot of ground.

In a shaky voice, Sally said defiantly, "I don't care what you think, Pat. There were little children in that wagon. I couldn't see them go hungry."

6

ROSS CULVER MET THE COVERED wagon a mile north of Dutch Springs. Ross was driving a buckboard back to town, and he pulled aside on the dusty road, watching the swaying approach of the cumbersome wagon with narrowed eyes.

There was a stubble of beard on the engineer's cheeks, and his face was thinner than it had been a month previously. His eyes had taken on a look of hard wariness

and his face and hands no longer carried the blisters of a tenderfoot. He had left off the black tie that added a touch of professional dignity to his attire, and wore his khaki shirt with sleeves rolled above the elbows and open at the throat. The shirt itself was sweat-stained, and his leather boots had lost all vestige of the polish they had worn into Powder Valley.

It had been a month of strain and of hard work for the Eastern engineer. He didn't mind the hard work. There was satisfaction in tackling a tough job with his two hands and his brain, but the bleak animosity of the valley ranchers was difficult for Culver to accept and endure. He and his men were as wholly ostracized as though they were lepers. There had been no more overt trouble since Sheriff Grimes deputized them and the threat of martial law was spread over the valley, but the caldron of hatred simmered ominously beneath the calm, and Culver was painfully conscious that any small incident might set off an explosion that would rock the placid valley from end to end.

He knew this was the first definite showdown, as he waited for the Hartsell's wagon to reach him. From Company headquarters in Denver, he had been informed that several parcels of land had been sold and the first eager settlers could be expected to dribble in soon. In vain Ross Culver had protested against this policy to President Biloff and his board of directors. It was far too early to start bringing in settlers, the engineer had pointed out. The short growing season of summer was more than half over, and work had scarcely begun on the dam and irrigation ditches. Even if there happened to be sufficient rainfall to raise crops without irrigation this first year, the frost was bound to come before anything could be harvested.

In Culver's mind, it was courting disaster to bring farmers in before the land was ready to receive them. He

argued that it would inevitably bring the whole project into disrepute if the first few families were unable to make a go of it and were forced to give up and move out before the contemplated irrigation system was ready for operation.

But his protests to headquarters had been unavailing. He had been reminded that he was the engineer, not the policy maker for the company; that it was his job to go ahead with the actual development work and not worry about the eventual success or failure of the project.

This attitude of the higher-ups in Denver had served to implant a tiny seed of doubt in Ross Culver's mind; a seed which stubbornly took root despite his efforts to rid himself of it. Perhaps the ranchers were right, and Jud Biloff didn't actually care whether the project was a success or not—just so he and his associates were able to sell the land for a huge profit to themselves.

Culver didn't want to think that about his employers. He refused to let his thoughts dwell on that ugly possibility. For he was a conscientious man, and he could never bring himself to lend his name and his efforts to such a barefaced piece of trickery. It would be downright dishonest to lure settlers into the valley merely to get their money for land which might prove to be utterly worthless to them. He *had* to make himself believe in the project in order to continue as engineer in charge. And the job was important to him in that it was his first real opportunity to distinguish himself in his profession; his first responsible position in complete charge of a project of this importance.

Thus, he found himself working a sort of self-hypnotism on his faculties which had the effect of blinding his mind to the hard realities in order to retain a measure of self-respect.

The inward battle that he had been fighting this past month was reflected in a certain haggardness of his features. An habitual frown of irritation had replaced his

customary smile of good humor and his speech had taken on a new curtness and force.

He leaned out of the buckboard and held up one hand as the prairie schooner came abreast of him, keenly studying the faces of Joe and Molly Hartsell with Baby-Doll between them on the front seat.

Culver felt instant pity, and then a strong tide of resentment against Biloff and his associates. The Hartsells were exactly the type he had hoped would not come this first summer. The determined look of cheerfulness on their faces as they returned his greeting did not fool him at all. He knew, instinctively, that they were buoyed up by false hopes, promises of a paradise that awaited them instead of this grim land that would take a lot of subduing before it gave forth the crops they needed.

But they were here now, and there was nothing for it except to make the best of the situation. He hated himself for the false note of cheerfulness he put in *his* voice as he said:

"I'm the engineer in charge of the Colorado Western Land and Development Company's property here. I have an idea you folks are looking for me."

"Well now, I reckon maybe we are, at that." Joe Hartsell leaned forward to peer at the man in the buckboard. "Like for somebody to show us where's the piece of land we bought. My name's Hartsell," he added. "Joe Hartsell from Kansas."

Culver leaped down and approached the wagon, holding out his hand. "My name is Culver. Glad to meet you, Mr. Hartsell. And"—he lifted his stiff felt hat—"Mrs. Hartsell."

Joe Hartsell gripped the engineer's hand, and Molly nodded to him. Baby-Doll sucked on her thumb and regarded him with wide inquisitive eyes. Joe said, "If you could show us which is section three; the southeast quarter . . ."

"It's all surveyed and marked out for you. I believe

your property is a hundred acres, lying right along the creek . . ."

Joe Hartsell nodded. There was a hungry look in his eyes. "I'm looking for it to be good land. The man sold it, promised me . . ."

"It's fine land," Culver assured him heartily. "The pick of the entire project. As soon as we get our irrigation canals in . . ."

"You mean it ain't irrigated yet?"

"Well . . . not yet," Culver replied, uncomfortably conscious of the direct gaze from Molly's eyes that was almost accusatory. "We can't do everything at once," he stumbled on. "You must understand how it is with a new development. Dams and irrigation ditches take time."

"And what are folks like us going to do while you're getting around to building them?" demanded Molly.

"Oh, there'll be plenty to do. You'll want to build a house . . . get your land cleared and ready for cultivation. It's all virgin territory, you know. Never had a plow put to it."

Joe Hartsell cleared his throat. "Folks hereabout don't seem to cotton to the idea," he muttered. "Back yonder in town . . . they acted like settlers wasn't wanted."

Ross Culver laughed, but there was a savage intonation of anger that belied his attempted lightness of tone. "You know how these Western ranchers are. Dead set in their ways. They don't understand the meaning of progress. They'll come around . . . once they see what it means to the country to have a development like this in their midst."

The Hartsells looked dubious, and Joe explained, "They didn't want to sell us groceries at the store. Said my money wasn't any good for buying things."

Ross Culver's eyes flashed angrily. He exclaimed, "So, that's what they've had up their sleeves? I've wondered why they were sitting back and taking things so tamely.

Well, it won't work." He struck his fist resoundingly into an open palm. "I'll open up a company store here on our own land . . . freight stuff in from Pueblo if need be. If you'll give me a list of things you need at once, I'll see that you get them as soon as you're located on your land."

Joe shook his head. "We're fixed all right for a little time. There was a lady in the store that bought the things Molly needed with her own money, and let Molly pay her for them. I wonder could we go on to our own place before it gets dark, Mister?"

"Of course. It's less than a mile ahead. Follow me and I'll show you." Culver went back to his buckboard, wheeled his team into the road ahead of the prairie schooner and held them down to a slow pace to accommodate the Kansan's tired horses.

The sun was dipping down toward the jagged peaks westward and the soft haze of early evening lay upon the wide fertile valley. The grass was rich and green on each side of the road, rising knee-high more than a mile westward where the line of willows marked the twisting course of Powder Creek. A covey of quail ran excitedly down the road in front of the buckboard as Culver turned off from the main road toward a gate in the new fence of tightly strung barbed wire that marked the western boundary of the company's land. They rose into low flight with a whir of wings when their short legs failed to outdistance the buckboard, and the loud roar of a twelve-gauge shotgun shattered the evening silence from behind Culver. Four of the birds fluttered down into the grass, either wounded or killed by the single shot, and Culver glanced back to see Joe Hartsell standing erect in the lurching wagon with a long-barreled shotgun at his shoulder.

At the same time a barefooted boy and girl erupted gleefully from the back of the wagon and ran through the long grass to retrieve the stricken birds. They came

hurrying back to the wagon, holding their prizes aloft, as it stopped behind the buckboard when Culver pulled up in front of the heavily padlocked gate.

The engineer got out and hesitated, then walked heavily back to the wagon, shaking his head.

Hartsell greeted him with a broad grin. "I guess maybe we won't starve . . . not if there's plenty of wild game for a man to shoot."

Culver stopped beside the wagon and tipped his hat back to show a disturbed countenance. "It was lucky none of the ranchers were near enough to hear the shot. You've got to remember you're on their property until you drive through this gate."

Hartsell rubbed his lean chin and looked bewildered. "Those are wild quail, ain't they?"

"They're wild, but the ranchers are funny about shooting them this time of the year. They're not full-grown yet," he explained as kindly as he could. "It's not considered sporting here to hunt them until fall."

Joe Hartsell continued to look bewildered. "I'm not studying about sport . . . I'm thinking about fresh meat for my young-uns."

Culver nodded curtly. "I understand . . . but the ranchers won't want to understand. Confine your hunting to company property and they won't have anything to say about it." He swung on his heel and went to unlock the heavy padlock on the gate, led his team through and waited until Hartsell drove through, then relocked it.

"You take this key," he told Hartsell, passing the wagon, "and keep the gate locked at all times. Then no one can get in without cutting the fence, and . . . they haven't started that yet."

He strode on to the buckboard and drove toward the creek. Joe Hartsell clucked at his team to follow, and frowned down at the key between his thumb and forefinger. "Kind of makes a man feel locked in," he grum-

bled. "And having lines where to shoot quail and not. I swear, Molly, it looks like . . ."

Hearing his tone of hurt and self-reproach, Molly pressed close to him and made her own voice sound very gay. "I'm sure it's just for a little while like the young man said, Joe. What do we care what the ranchers think? We can stay inside the fence just as well as not. *Look* at that big rabbit, Joe. He's too far away for a shot, but he certainly would make a fine stew, cooked up with some potatoes and onions."

Joe shook the lines to make the team step a little faster, and glanced down thankfully at the sunbonneted head pressed against his shoulder. In an unsteady voice, he confided, "You're the finest wife a man ever had, Molly. I've been thinking maybe I made an awful bad mistake coming out here. It's not going to be any fun for you . . . being hated by all your neighbors."

"I don't care," Molly assured him stoutly. "We've got each other and . . . and a piece of *land* that'll grow things. Look! He's stopping up there and getting out. That must be our land, Joe. It does look rich. Rich enough to grow anything."

Joe nodded. His eyes were bright again. The sun had dropped below the western peaks and the valley floor was tinged with the deep purple hue of twilight. The ground was flat here, sloping gently downward toward the creek.

"This is your northwest corner," Ross Culver told them, pointing to a new stake driven firmly into the ground. "Your piece is approximately two thousand feet square, running straight down to the creek, and parallel to the creek to another stake that I'll show you tomorrow. All four corners are plainly marked so you won't have any trouble finding your boundary lines."

"Do you mean we'll be . . . the only ones here?" Hartsell asked.

"For the time being," Culver replied cheerfully. "You

just happen to be the first arrivals. No doubt, more families will be along soon to keep you company. You'll be wanting to get fixed for the night," he went on hastily, "so I won't bother you any longer. I'll be along tomorrow to see that you don't need anything." He shut his eyes to the look of dismay on Joe and Molly's faces, spoke loudly to his team and trotted back up the slope toward the fence gate.

A complete and unnatural silence gripped the valley after his departure. As far as the eye could see there was no moving thing except the gently waving grass and the willows nodding before an evening breeze on the banks of the creek.

Joe Hartsell cleared his throat and gave his wife an oblique glance. In an unnecessarily loud voice, he said:

"I reckon we better drive on and camp by water tonight. Tomorrow . . . we'll locate a place to build our house."

Molly was staring with lifted face at the low hills rising against the darkening sky beyond the creek. In an almost inaudible voice, she agreed, "Yes, Joe. Tomorrow we'll . . . we'll have plenty of time to look around."

The horse's hoofs thudded on the soft bottom land, and the wagon wheels creaked as Joe drove on to the bank of the creek. When he stopped and jumped down from the wagon seat, he drew in a deep breath and exclaimed almost defiantly, "Feel that coolness coming on, Molly. The air's different from Kansas . . . plenty different."

"It certainly is." Molly's voice was crisp as she accepted his hand to step down over the hub. "We'll need all our blankets sleeping out . . . and we'd best have plenty of firewood in case it gets real cold. Joey! You and Mary start gathering dry wood."

The children obeyed cheerfully, excited and thrilled by the strange land and the new life to which they had come.

Molly competently set about heating up some dinner, and a pot of savory stew was boiling over the crackling fire by the time Joe had the team unharnessed, watered, and staked out for the night where they could fill their bellies with the lush grass.

It was a cheerful and heartening sight to the man when he returned and found his little family sprawled out on pallets contentedly eating their first really good meal for days, and he stopped just inside the circle of firelight to thrust his hands deep into his pockets and survey them quizzically.

Molly jumped up and came to him as he stood there. He awkwardly put an arm about her thin shoulders, and for a moment thought he felt her trembling. Then she stiffened against him and resolutely lifted her face to the clear sky where vagrant stars were beginning to pop out. He stroked her hair gently and said:

"I know it seems pretty bad, Molly, but it'll be different as soon as some neighbors come and we get a little house built and a garden patch cleared."

"It's . . . it's fine, Joe. It seems lonesome now, but I'm sure there'll be others along soon. The children are going to . . . love it here."

A plaintive ululation drifted downwind from the low hills across the creek. A long-drawn wailing sound, pitched in a minor key, rising to a passionate crescendo and trembling off to a faint echo, then culminating in a wild exultant clamor of frenzied yapping that sounded like the chorus from a hundred furry throats.

A second coyote answered from another wind-swept knoll, and in a moment a third and fourth joined in the nightly serenade to the setting sun.

Joe Hartsell's arm tightened about his wife's shoulders. He reassured her, "It's only some kind of wolves they have out here. We'll get used to them."

She laughed shakily. "Only . . . wolves." She turned

away from him to face the savage clamor. In a moment she said queerly, "They sound the way this country makes me feel, Joe. Sad and lonely, yet with a sort of aching desire inside of me to grab hold of something and destroy it."

Joe Hartsell did not answer her. Sometimes he didn't understand Molly, and he had learned that words were useless between them at such times.

In a moment he left her quietly, and went to the fire to serve himself from the pot of bubbling stew. He did not know that the tears were flowing unashamedly down Molly's cheeks.

7

THE LONG RIDE HOME FROM DUTCH Springs was like a nightmare to Sally Stevens. Like a horrible nightmare from which one strives to awake but cannot do so. Pat Stevens sat beside her in tight-lipped silence. Dock was in the back of the buckboard, still bloody and bruised from his encounter with the homesteader's boy. He remained silent during the long ride also, painfully conscious of the strained relationship between his mother and father in the front seat.

Pat hadn't said anything to Sally back there in town. After the prairie schooner creaked away clumsily, he acted like a stranger to his wife, asking her about her purchases in a curt, harsh voice, going into the store for them and loading them into the buckboard, refusing to speak to the other citizens and ranchers who crowded around indignantly and demanded what he intended to do about the Hartsells.

That was the beginning of Sally's nightmare. The strange, impersonal manner in which she was treated by men who had always shown her every politeness. No one spoke to her. They acted as though she had ceased to exist. Twice, she impulsively tried to explain the feeling

that had prompted her to help the Hartsells obtain food, but the men rudely turned their backs and would not listen.

It was the first time in her life that Sally had been made to feel an outcast. After the second attempt to explain, she stood back against the store front with compressed lips and heightened color.

When Pat had the buckboard loaded, he curtly ordered her to get in while he crawled up on the seat and gathered up the lines. Grim-faced men made way for her to reach the buckboard as though she were the bearer of a dread disease and they feared to be contaminated if she got too close.

She folded her hands in her lap and stared straight ahead as Pat urged the team into a fast trot and they left Dutch Springs behind them.

Sally stole a look at the cold profile of the man whom she loved better than life itself. He sat erect, staring straight ahead, his thoughts as utterly withdrawn from her as though she were a thousand miles away.

After half a mile Sally couldn't stand the silence any longer. She timidly put her hand on his arm and cried out piteously, "I couldn't help it, Pat. Did you see that hungry woman . . . those half-starved children."

Pat said, "I saw them," in a voice that dismissed the subject.

But Sally refused to be dismissed that way. Her fingers tightened on his arm. "I can't stand to be treated this way, Pat. We've always talked things over before."

Pat said, "There's nothing to talk over this time. You knew it was my plan not to sell the nesters any groceries. You made a fool out of me before all the men that trusted me. That's all there is to it."

Sally shook his arm and cried wildly, "There's more to it than that. Those people were human beings. I couldn't . . . I just *couldn't* let them drive on hungry."

Pat Stevens didn't answer Sally. His face was as hard as

a visage carved of stone. He shouted to the team and the harsh urgency of his voice lifted them into a fast lope.

Sally let go of his arm and shrank back to her side of the seat. It was their first quarrel—their first *real* quarrel. She felt the sickness of utter despair inside of her. Other husbands and wives quarreled—but not she and Pat. They had always been so proud of that. Now it had come. After ten years. It couldn't be, a frantic voice cried out wildly inside her. But it *was.*

This man beside her was a stranger. She knew the terrible temper that dwelt inside her husband. She had seen it in action before, but always directed at someone else. She knew his singleness of purpose, the driving determination that refused to compromise once he had set his gaze on a certain goal. She had been proud of that quality of Pat's in the past, but now she was desperately afraid. A vista of loneliness opened out before her. Suppose Pat never spoke to her again!

When they reached the ranch, Pat stopped the team near the front door and got down. He went around to the back and swung Dock out to the ground, shouldered a box of groceries and started around to the kitchen. He passed Sally without looking at her, without speaking.

Dock ran to her suddenly. His blood- and dust-grimed face was twisted in fright, and big tears rolled out of his eyes. He whimpered, "Is Daddy *mad?* Why doesn't he say something? Why doesn't he lick me for fighting? I wish he would, 'stead of lookin' like that.".

Sally knelt in the hard-packed dirt of the yard and put her arms about her small son. "Daddy's not mad at you, Dock. He's not going to lick you for fighting."

"I wisht he would. What's he mad at then?"

"He's mad at me," Sally told him sadly. She caught his tear-muddied face and pressed it against her cheek, crying out forlornly, "Oh, Dock! I don't know what I'm going to do."

Pat came striding back just then. If he noted the heart-breaking tableau presented by his wife and son, he gave no sign. He led the team to the barn and started unharnessing.

Sally took Dock inside and had him wash his face and hands, and change his dirty, torn clothing. She went about the kitchen fixing supper with her ears attuned for the sound of Pat coming in the front door. He was so long in coming that she began to think he must have saddled a horse and ridden off without telling her.

Her heart was constricted with a fear she had never known before. Her hands fumbled at their familiar tasks, and salt tears got in the biscuits as she rolled them out.

She stopped crying when Pat's step sounded on the front threshold. Everything was miraculously all right again. She could stand anything except to have him ride off without telling her where he was going.

She heard the creak of his rocking chair as she flew about the kitchen doing the last necessary things before dishing up an appetizing supper. When the steaming dishes were on the dining table she went to the door and called, "Come and get it, Pat, before I throw it out to the hogs."

Pat got up heavily and came to the dining room. The set sternness of his face had not relaxed one iota. Dock came running in, fresh-scrubbed and cheerful, with only a bruise and a cut lip to show for his fight.

Pat ate supper without speaking. Sally found herself making conversation to Dock in a subdued undertone, as though the man at the head of the table were a stranger who must not be disturbed by their talk.

Pat stalked back to his chair in the living room when supper was over. Sally listlessly began removing the dishes to the kitchen. Slow anger began to burn in her breast as she went about the nightly work of cleaning up. She was through being treated like a condemned criminal.

She had done nothing to be ashamed of. Pat had no right to act as though it were an unforgivable crime to buy the Hartsells some groceries.

She knew other men who sometimes treated their wives like this, but Pat had never been like other men. From the beginning, their marriage had been a partnership. They had always talked everything over, often disagreeing but always reaching a satisfactory compromise by having tolerance and respect for each other's opinions.

Sally was ready to do battle by the time the kitchen and dining room were cleaned up. She whisked off her apron and hung it up, fluffed out her hair and went into the living room where Pat sat in his favorite chair staring into the fireplace and Dock was sprawled out on the floor behind him tying and untying knots in a piece of string.

Sally stopped in the doorway and said, "Please go to your room, Dock."

He started to protest, "Aw, Mom," but she cut him off firmly, "Run along. I want to talk to your father."

He got up and ran along without further argument after looking up at her face.

Very deliberately, Sally pulled up a chair in front of Pat's and sat down. She said, "This isn't going to happen to us, Pat. I won't let it."

His strong features twitched. When he looked at her Sally discerned utter misery in his brooding eyes. He asked, "What aren't you going to let happen?"

She brushed the unnecessary question aside. "You know I couldn't do different this afternoon. There's not a bit of use for you to pretend. You would have done the very same thing yourself if you'd seen the look on those folks' faces when Mr. Winters told them he wouldn't sell them anything. Don't you deny it, Pat Stevens. I know you too well."

"That is just what's the matter with me. I know it, Sally," said Pat suddenly. He sounded dismayed and he

looked at her with such an expression of self-reproach that Sally found she had to laugh at him.

When she was able to stop laughing, she wailed, "You frightened me by being so stern and silent. I thought you would never forgive me."

"I'm pretty well mixed up," he told her sourly. "I don't know what the other men are going to think. I've kept them from starting anything this long by planning to run the farmers out as fast as they came in. When my idea had its first test today, you ruined it."

"And you just admitted it was the right thing to do." Pat frowned at her and shook his head. "I didn't say that."

"You did too. You admitted you'd have done the same."

"But that's not saying it's the *right* thing," he argued. "It's not doing the nesters any favor to encourage them to settle down. You know that. It'll be harder for them in the end. Might be a lot better for them to go hungry right now and keep on moving."

"Pat! You can't mean that."

"But I do mean it, Sally. They've got a little cash-money, maybe. Those people this afternoon didn't look like they had much. What'll they do when it runs out? They'll be worse off than they are right now. *They can't stay here in the valley.*" He pounded his fist on his knee. "You know they can't. Well then, the sooner they find it out the better all 'round."

"Oh, Pat! I don't know. It's an awful mess any way you look at it. Those poor children! And that man and woman, Pat. Their voices when they spoke of their 'land.' All they want is a chance to make a decent living. *They* haven't done anything wrong. How can we blame them?"

"I'm not blaming them." Pat twisted his face and doubled both fists. "I'm not blaming them at all. But what else can we do?"

Sally said, "I don't know." She shivered and blinked

her eyes rapidly. "I suppose they're camped down by the creek tonight . . . on *their* land. Think how they must feel after being treated like lepers in Dutch Springs this afternoon. Think of the hope they brought with them . . . striking out to look for a new home where they can raise a crop and feed their children."

"It's mean," Pat agreed somberly. "Downright murder to encourage them to come out here where they've not got a chance." He arose and began to stride up and down the living room, furrowing his bronzed forehead.

"I'll try to have a talk with that feller tomorrow. Maybe I can make him see sense. I'll . . . I'll see that he has enough money to go on with, Sally. But I've *got* to get him out of there. If we let one settle . . . more'll settle alongside 'em. And right now the boys in town are blaming me for this afternoon. They'll be saying I tricked them, Sally."

Sally sat with her chin in her palms, staring into the fire while Pat paced up and down restlessly. She tried to think things out, but there wasn't any simple answer. It was all wrong. That was all she knew. There was no reason why the Hartsells and the Stevenses should be enemies. There was room enough in the West for everybody without trampling on each others' toes. Why had peaceful Powder Valley been singled out for this tragedy?

She couldn't get the thought of the Hartsells out of her mind. Why hadn't she invited them to come to the ranch for at least tonight? Then she and Pat could have talked to them, pointed out how impossible it was.

But it wasn't only the Hartsells. She knew they were only the vanguard of hundreds like them who would soon be swarming into the valley. Gaunt men and faded women. Undernourished children. Pat was right. For their *own* sakes, they must not be allowed to settle in the unproductive mountain valley. The ranchers would never allow the dam and irrigation ditches to be built. That

was a foregone conclusion. Winter would come and the miserable immigrants would never survive the snows and bitter cold. The merciful thing would be to drive them out now—

Sally's thoughts were interrupted by the strident sound of boot heels thudding up the walk outside. She jerked her head aside and saw Pat going to the door.

He opened it to admit one of the cowboys who worked on the Lazy Mare. In an excited voice, he panted:

"Thought you'd wanta know, Pat. They're fixin' to burn them pilgrims out tonight. I rode like a bat outta hell from town. They ain't meanin' to tell you 'cause Miz Stevens bought 'em groceries this afternoon an' they figger you've turned on 'em. I knowed that weren't so an' I thought you'd wanta get in on it."

Pat rapped out, "Thanks." He shoved the puncher toward the door. "Saddle me a hawse." He whirled and trotted for the bedroom before Sally could get to her feet.

She intercepted him when he came out buckling on his guns.

She clung to him and cried, "Pat! You're not going to . . ."

He shoved her aside. His face was lined and impassive. He reminded her sharply, "You brought this on, Sally. If you hadn't interfered this afternoon the boys wouldn't have been driven to do this."

She ran after him as he stalked toward the door, tried to pull him back. "Pat! Please don't do it. I can't stand it . . ."

Pat went out into the night darkness without looking back. Sally leaned against the door and each thud of a boot heel on the walk vibrated through her as though Pat were walking on her heart. She heard the creak of saddle leather, and the shod hoofs of two horses leaping away at a gallop. She shut the door on the sound and went

back to stare into the dancing flames and try not to think about what was happening down by the creek where an innocent family was spending its first night in Powder Valley.

8

THERE WAS NO MOON OVERHEAD, BUT brilliant starlight lay on the road south from the Lazy Mare ranch. Pat Stevens sat erect in the saddle, spurring his horse on, staring straight ahead over the silvered sweep of sage, so peaceful and seemingly so remote from violence.

But Pat knew the temper of his Valley neighbors, understood the seething anger that had been aroused in Dutch Springs that afternoon by his wife. He knew they were calling him a traitor tonight, that they were blaming him for the fact that the Hartsells had settled on the creek.

He couldn't blame them for that. He had forced them to listen to him these last few weeks, had averted an open outbreak between ranchers and employees of the land company by urging them to meet the situation by legal means instead of going outside the law.

Well, they had listened to him. For years the counsel of Pat Stevens had carried a lot of weight in Powder Valley. They had been willing to wait, to see if the hoemen could be discouraged from settling by refusing to sell them the necessities of life from the only local store.

It had looked like a good idea, but that bubble was exploded now. They weren't willing to wait any longer, and a bloody civil war was certain to result from tonight's raid. The threat of martial law hung over Powder Valley, the promise that troops would be brought in if the local sheriff was unable to enforce the law.

In short, there was going to be hell to pay.

This was what Pat had been desperately striving to avoid—and this was what he and Sally had brought on the peaceful Valley by her impulsive action in Dutch Springs.

Pat's thoughts were all mixed up as he thundered down the starlit road to meet the advancing group of men. It was the first time in his life he had ever hesitated to take direct action to achieve an end he believed to be right. But always before there had been a clean-cut line between what was right and what was wrong. Now there was no such line.

Certainly the Hartsells were not wrong. They were innocent victims, to be pitied rather than ridden against. And against the arguments of his fellow ranchers, Pat could feel no real anger against the engineer and his men. They were merely doing a job they were hired to do.

The only real enemies of the valley were the men who stood behind the scenes and pulled the strings: the officials of the land company who had tricked the ranchers out of their holdings and who were now tricking poor devils like Joe Hartsell out of their life's savings.

And they couldn't be touched. They were sitting secure behind mahogany desks in Denver, protected by the law while they exploited rancher and farmer alike. It made no difference to them how much blood flowed in Powder Valley—how many families like the Hartsells were burned out in the night. Their profits continued to flow in, no matter what happened in Powder Valley.

Hot anger against those higher-ups of the land company seethed through Pat Stevens as he spurred on through the night to meet his friends and neighbors who had turned against him. He had hated many men in the past, but never as he now hated Jud Biloff. He had met other men with flaming guns and shot them down with cold ruthlessness, but they had been *men*. They had

taken their chances and received payment for their folly in hot lead. The president of the land company was in a different category. Jud Biloff was taking no chances with his own precious hide. A thousand men might die because of his scheming; mothers and children might starve or perish miserably from the cold—but none of that could touch Jud Biloff.

A special hell should be created for men like Biloff, Pat told himself as he pounded on, and his seething thoughts planned how he might personally arrange such a hell for the financier.

Abruptly, he saw a dark mass of mounted men riding down the road ahead of him. He was meeting them almost opposite the padlocked gate leading in to the Hartsell property. He reined up in front of the advancing raiders, a single figure facing twenty armed and determined night riders.

The young cowboy galloped up happily from behind him. "Got here just in time," he exulted. "I shore wouldn't of missed this for nothin'. An' I knew you'd wanta be in on it, too, Pat. I told 'em they was crazy as coots when they talked around town about you throwin' in with the plow hands."

Pat said, "Get away from me, kid, if you want to stay clear of trouble." The advancing riders were close, less than a hundred yards distant. They were riding at a slow trot that was more ominous in its grim purposefulness than a wild gallop would have been.

"What yuh mean?" the puncher demanded, gaping at his boss. "I got a right to be in on the fun."

"Fun, hell!" retorted Pat. "I'm warning you . . . don't stay too close." He rose in his stirrups and challenged the mass of riders, "Who's that . . . headed where?"

Above the jangle of spurs and thud of hoofs, he heard voices growling, "That's Pat. Yeh . . . Stevens. Lookin' fer trouble, mebbe . . ." They slowed in front of him and

John Boyd's voice came clearly above the muttering:

"I reckon you know who we are and where we're headed, Pat. You throwin' in with us?"

"To burn out a woman and her kids?" There was hot scorn in Pat's reply.

"To run them damn homesteaders out," a rough voice bawled above Boyd's. "Them that you an' yore wife coddled in town."

"I know you, Jim Farrelly." Pat dropped a hand to his gun. "You're full of rotgut whisky or you wouldn't be talkin' thataway."

"He's settin' hisself ag'in us," Farrelly shouted. "We've listened to Pat Stevens long enough, fellers. What are we waitin' fer? Who's got them wire cutters?"

"First man cuts a strand of that fence gets dropped." Pat's voice cut through the night incisively. He drew a gun, hunched forward in the saddle. "You boys know me," he pleaded.

"Shore, we know you. Too dang well." Half a dozen voices were lifted angrily. John Boyd spurred his horse forward between them and Pat.

"Don't do it, Pat." The older rancher's face was resolute in the illusive light. "We got our minds made up. We listened to you before, but now we're *doing* something."

"You must be proud of yourselves," Pat jeered. "Twenty of you to burn out one nester. Don't be *fools.* Those are innocent people. They're asleep down yonder." He waved his arm toward the creek where the dying embers of a campfire glowed in the night. "It's murder, John. You know it is."

"Murder or not, that's the way it's got to be." John Boyd spoke with the fervor of deep conviction. "You can't stop us, Pat. No use you gettin' killed tryin'."

"I'd rather be killed tryin' than keep on living knowin' I *didn't* try. They'll send troops in here, John . . ."

An ominous murmur from behind Boyd greeted Pat's words. "Let 'em try it! We'll take keer of the troops. This is Powder Valley, b'God. *We'll* run things here."

"Don't you see how it'll be, John? Some of those men behind you are shootin' drunk. It won't end with burning the 'steaders out. There'll be killin'. And there's women and children down there."

"*We* got women an' children too," Jim Farrelly shouted. He spurred forward beside John Boyd drunkenly waving a gun. "We cain't trust you no longer, Pat. If you wanta hunk of lead . . ."

Pat drove his rowels into his horse's side. The animal lunged forward against Farrelly's mount and Pat slammed the barrel of his .45 against the drunken rancher's chin. Farrelly slid sideways out of the saddle to the ground.

Pat rasped out of the side of his mouth to Boyd, "You got to stand by me, John. You've *got* to."

The loud thunder of hoofs down the road from town interrupted his friend's reply. Pat rode forward into the close-packed bunch of men, his eyes blazing. "If that's the sheriff or some of his deputies, let me handle 'em. *Don't do any shooting.* You can settle with me afterward."

He holstered his gun and pushed his horse on through the ranks of grumbling men who were upset and uncertain in the face of this new development.

There were only two riders coming from town, driving their mounts to the limit of their speed. Pat rode twenty paces to meet them, then reined up suddenly. Even in the faint moonlight he recognized the huge man with his small companion. He turned his horse across the road and shouted. "Ezra! Sam! Pull up."

The riders pulled up in front of him and Ezra's voice boomed out happily, "By Gawd, if 'tain't Pat Stevens! We knowed that talk in town was crazy an' thet you'd be Johnny-on-the-spot fer a job like this."

Between his teeth, Pat bit out, "Shut up your big mouth, Ezra. You an' Sam are just in time to back me up an' send these fellows high-tailing it."

"What's that?" Sam barked out. "What kinda talk is that, Pat?"

"It's the only sensible talk going on around here," Pat raged. "C'mon and get in front of these rannies. They'll think twice before trying to jump our three guns."

He whirled his horse off the road to get between the raiding party and the land-company fence. From long habit of accepting orders from Pat Stevens, Sam and Ezra rode with him.

As the trio lined up facing the mob, Pat warned, "There's three of us now. Three of the fastest guns in Powder Valley. Anybody hankerin' to do suicide to themselves?"

"Is that right, Sam?" an incredulous rancher cried. "You an' Ezra throwin' in with Pat ag'in us?"

"I reckon so," Sam mumbled defensively. "Reckon he's right when you think it over. He mos' gen'ally is."

Taking advantage of the indecision of the group, Pat spoke crisply, "You'll all hang on a murder charge if you don't cool down an' call this raiding party off. Don't you see that's just what the land company wants? They're waiting for an excuse to put Powder Valley under martial law. You all know that. We lose the fight right now if we give them that excuse."

"He's right, boys." John Boyd rode forward and aligned himself with Pat, Sam and Ezra. "We jumped into this without thinkin'. Too much whisky an' too much loose talk."

"What do you aim tuh do? Leave them damn nesters camped there?"

"For the time being, yes," Pat snapped. "They're innocent victims just like we are. A man named Biloff is to blame . . . not these poor people from Kansas."

"By golly, Pat's right . . . Yeh, but that ain't no answer . . . what are we gonna *do?*"

Pat stilled the loud tumult by shouting, "I'll tell you what we're going to do. We're going after the one man that brought this whole mess on our heads. Jud Biloff. He's the one we've got to deal with."

"That's right. Get Biloff . . . but how you gonna do it? . . . He's in Denver . . . He daren't show his face here . . ."

"We'll go to Denver after him," Pat shouted. "I will. I'll explain exactly how things are here. I'll show him he can't build his dam nohow."

"That's the ticket . . . now Pat's talkin' sense . . . get him out here . . . we'll string Biloff up to a cottonwood tree . . ."

"That makes sense," Pat told them grimly. "I won't lift a finger to stop you from swinging Biloff at the end of a rope. But these settlers are different. *They* didn't steal our land by lying to us."

"Do you think Biloff will listen to you?" John Boyd asked anxiously. "More'n likely, he'll give you the horse-laugh, Pat. 'Cordin' to law he ain't done nothin' wrong."

"He'll listen to me," Pat promised grimly. He raised his voice to the other men: "I'll start for Denver in the morning. Go back home and take off your guns. That's not the way to fight this thing. Not yet," he ended ominously. "Not till I see Biloff. If he won't listen to reason . . . we'll, I'll be ridin' with you. That's a promise. But not against women and children. Let's fight someone that can fight back."

As the men began to disperse and turn back to town, Boyd muttered, "Lucky you was here to stop us, Pat. I reckon we was all blood-crazy. Scares me to think what might have happened. I saw a sheep camp burned out once . . . down in the San Luis Valley. I used to wake up at night years afterward hearin' the screams of them sheepherders in my dreams."

Pat nodded somberly. "A mob is something no man can figure, John. It's like a snowball rolling down a hill."

"By golly," Sam said in an aside to Ezra, "it'll be good to see Denver again, huh? You reckon that little red-headed gal is still down on Larimer Street?"

Pat demanded, "Who said anything about you going to Denver?"

"Shucks, Pat, you know we cain't let you expose yoreself to the wicked sins of the big city without no one to watch over you. You bein' a married man to boot . . ."

"I'll have enough trouble in Denver without worrying about you two," Pat said flatly. "You'll be needed here to keep the lid on things until I get back."

Ezra started to protest, but Sam nudged him sharply in the ribs. "Yep. I reckon yo're right," he said mournfully. "C'mon, Ezra. We might's well be ridin'."

Pat stared after them suspiciously as they rode away. He didn't like Sam's tone. Sounded as if they were cooking up something. But he had plenty of other things to worry about if he caught the morning train from Hopewell Junction. He wondered if he'd better take Sally, decided against it even though he knew she would enjoy the trip. This was going to be a man's job.

9

PAT STEVENS HAD TO LEAVE THE LAZY Mare at four o'clock the next morning to reach Hopewell Junction in time to catch the train to Denver.

Sally was up at three-thirty preparing him a hot breakfast. She hummed happily to herself as she spread a fresh cloth on the dining table, set out a platter of sizzling steak, and a bowl of cream gravy to go on the cold biscuits left over from supper.

For the first time in weeks a great load of dread was

lifted from Sally's mind. It seemed to her that Pat's decision to go to Denver to interview the president of the land company was the first sensible thing that had been done since the surveyors came to Powder Valley.

She had complete faith in her husband's ability to persuade Biloff to call the whole project off. All he had to do was to present the true facts. Mr. Biloff would have to agree, once he was convinced it was utterly useless for him to go on with the dam and irrigation ditches.

It all looked just that simple to Sally Stevens. She smiled admiringly at her tall husband when he strode into the breakfast room, freshly shaved and dressed in his best clothes for the city journey. He was a fine figure of a man. He wore the new boots he had ordered from Pueblo that spring, with russet leather tops inlaid with small diamonds of white leather and decorated with an intricately stitched design; a pair of tan trousers that Sally had pressed with a hot iron the night before, a red flannel shirt, buttoned at the throat with a black four-in-hand tie about his neck.

Sally served him a generous breakfast of meat and biscuits and hot gravy, and saw that he had a steaming cup of coffee at his elbow. Then she sat opposite him and rested her chin in her palms, surveyed him with sparkling eyes.

"You're so darned handsome it scares me to have you go to the city alone, Pat. Don't you look too hard at any of those pretty Denver girls that'll be flirting with you."

Pat stuffed a square inch of steak in his mouth and balanced half a gravied biscuit on his fork. "This is business, honey. Mighty important business. I reckon I'll have my mind on something more important than girls."

The joking twinkle went out of Sally's eyes. "You're not looking for trouble?"

He shook his head. "I never look for it. But Biloff is a hard man. He'll take a lot of convincing."

"You're not . . . packing a gun, Pat?"

He shook his head again, thoughtfully chewing a mouthful of steak and biscuit.

"Nope," he reassured her. "I'm not a big enough fool to go up against the city with a lone gun. If I can't do the job with talking . . . well, we'll have to try something else."

"He'll surely understand," she cried. "When you explain how things are . . ."

Pat smiled across the breakfast table grimly. "Trouble is, Sally, I ain't at all sure he cares whether the farms can be made to go or not."

She wrinkled her forehead and complained, "I don't understand."

He said, "You wouldn't. That's what they call smart business, Sally. Don't you see how it stands? Even if he *knows* people can't raise crops, what's it to him as long as they *think* they can and buy the land from him? In fact," Pat went on deliberately, "might be best for him if they do starve out after a year or so. Then he can sell the land all over again to some other hopeful cuss from back East."

"But that's terrible! It's downright stealing to take people's money for land he knows won't support them."

Pat nodded. "You and me call it stealing. But men like Biloff call it smart business."

"I can't believe any man would be so heartless," Sally cried out.

"That's because you've lived here in Powder Valley so long where we figure things different. I'm not saying Mr. Biloff is like that," Pat went on hastily, noting the look of dismay on his wife's face. "I sure hope he ain't. I hope he'll listen to reason." He shrugged his wide shoulders and cleaned up his plate with half a biscuit. "But I'm not bankin' too much on making him see the light."

Sally hurried around the table and clung to him when

he pushed back his chair and got up. "You'll be careful," she implored. "Don't let your temper get the best of you no matter what happens. You're not used to city ways."

Pat laughed shortly. "I aim to do all the persuadin' I can," he drawled.

"You've got to do it, Pat." Sally held him tightly. "It's the only chance. After what happened last night . . ."

He nodded somberly. "The boys ain't going to hold back any longer if I come back with bad news," he admitted. He turned Sally's face up and kissed her lips, then strode out through the living room where he got a soft-brimmed Stetson and a sheepskin-lined leather jacket from a wall hanger.

It was not quite daylight when he went out to the corral and saddled a horse. Sally stood in the open doorway silhouetted by the yellow lamplight behind her and waved to him as he rode away through the frosty air of pre-dawn.

It was sunup when Pat rode through Dutch Springs without stopping, and he had fifteen minutes left before train time when he reached Hopewell Junction.

He left his horse at a livery stable to await his return, bought a round-trip ticket to Denver in the little depot that had been the scene of his first meeting with Sally more than ten years before.

She hadn't been Mrs. Stevens, then. She had come from Denver expecting to meet a husband whom she had seen only a couple of times, and had been met by a hard-faced stranger with the news that her husband had been murdered.

They had faced plenty of trouble and danger together during the ensuing days, Pat reminded himself grimly. This time, though, it was a different sort of trouble—the kind that couldn't be settled by blazing guns but infinitely more vicious than any he had ever faced before.

He was the only passenger to get on when the little combination train puffed into the station. There was

one uncrowded passenger coach directly behind the coal tender, with a motley assortment of freight and cattle cars hooked on behind, and a caboose at the very end.

The train crew had some switching to do at the cattle pens below the station, and three punchers crawled into the caboose for the trip to the Denver stockyards after four cars of bawling yearlings were added to the train.

Pat was sitting in the coach while the switching took place, and he didn't see the three men get aboard. If he had seen them he wouldn't have been so easy in his mind about his trip to the city.

It was almost a day's journey for the little combination train to Pueblo where Pat's coach was switched on to the main line of the D. & R.G.W. The frequent stops between Pueblo and Denver gave Pat a sleepless night, and when he got off at the city terminus the next morning his eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep and he wore an unbecoming stubble of beard on his bronzed face.

He went directly to the Oxford Hotel close by, the regular meeting place of cowmen from all over the west while in Denver, and paid for the luxury of a room with a bathtub and running hot water.

He took his time about shaving and breakfast because he knew city men seldom reached their offices before eight o'clock, and it was a few minutes after that hour when he strolled up Seventeenth Street to the Exchange Building whose four stories towered two above those of its neighbors.

The office of the Colorado Western Land and Development Company was on the second floor. Pat trusted himself in the open grillwork elevator to take him up. He entered a small, plainly furnished outer office with a row of straight wooden chairs lined up against the wall.

A girl smiled at him from behind a wooden partition. He took off his Stetson and told her he wanted to see Mr. Judson Biloff.

The girl told him Mr. Biloff had not yet arrived, and

would he mind waiting. Pat politely assured her he didn't mind at all.

As he turned back to a chair he saw a large brightly colored lithograph on the wall. He walked over and studied it with his hands on his hips. In huge block letters at the bottom, he read, POWDER VALLEY PROJECT.

It took him a long time to make head or tail of it. It looked like no portion of Powder Valley he had ever seen. There was a large neatly blocked-out city labeled Dutch Springs, with large buildings that were marked "Courthouse," "Church," etc. A wavy line of green seemed to mark the course of Powder Creek, and the area on each side was laid out in squares and rectangles of varying sizes. Many of the plots were marked in bold lettering, "SOLD."

The girl came around her partition to Pat's side as he stood before the lithograph. She asked brightly, "Are you interested in purchasing a nice irrigated farm?"

Pat shuddered but did not look at her. He asked, "You folks got this for sale?"

"All the farms that aren't marked 'Sold.' But they're going fast. It's a wonderful investment."

Pat said, "It looks mighty pretty, ma'am. Good farmin' country, I reckon?"

"It's an earthly paradise. The richest land in the West. Why, they don't even have to plow the ground. Just go out and scatter seeds and rake them in. It will grow anything." She spoke in a singsong that showed the words had been memorized.

Pat frowned. "I know that part of the country pretty good. Never knew it was all fixed up this pretty."

"The project isn't quite completed," she told him glibly. "That's not an actual photograph, but an artist's conception of the way the desert valley will flower when the irrigation is in."

Pat said mildly, "I reckon that artist feller had a heap of imagination," and turned away.

The girl hesitated, biting her lips. Sometimes she didn't understand these tall, soft-voiced Westerners.

A short, stout man came bustling in the door. He had a round, beaming face and he carried a bulging leather brief case. He wore a flashy plaid suit, a bowler that tipped back on his head, gray spats and a celluloid collar with a black bow tie almost hidden by three chins.

He said, "Morning, Gertie. The Chief in yet?"

"Why, Mr. Schultz. I thought you were still in Kansas."

"Not me, cutie. Not old Schultzie." He tapped his brief case importantly with a pudgy manicured forefinger. "Wait'll the Chief sees these documents. Have I cleaned up, or have I cleaned up?"

"Had a good trip, eh?" Gertie retreated demurely behind her partition while Pat looked on and listened with interest.

"A good trip, did you ask, kiddo? Did I have a good trip, she asks me?" Schultz laughed and winked at Pat. "Why, I had those dry-land Kansas hicks scrambling for Powder Valley farmsites like a flock of hungry Dominickers going after a feeding of cracked corn. It's Westward Ho from Kansas, that's what it is."

"You'd better go in Mr. Biloff's private office and wait for him," Gertie suggested. "He'll be down soon."

Pat sat stiffly in one of the straight chairs and rolled a cigarette while the land salesman went through a wooden door marked PRIVATE.

He thumbed a match and put fire to the crimped end of the brown paper, dragged smoke into his lungs and it seemed to him it was the first clean breath he had tasted since entering the office.

The outer door opened again and this time a tall man strode in. He had a thin, stern face; with a close-cropped black mustache across his upper lip. He carried a black walking stick which he tapped on the floor as he passed Pat without looking at him. Two gold teeth showed un-

der his mustache when he said, "Good morning," to Gertie.

She said, "Good morning, Mr. Biloff. Mr. Schultz is waiting in your office."

"Schultz, eh?" Judson Biloff opened the door and went in.

Pat discovered that he was breathing deeply, and that his fingers had crushed the limp cigarette out. He was sure the short hairs at the back of his neck had risen when Biloff went through the room.

Gertie said brightly, "That was Mr. Biloff, our president. I'm afraid you'll have to wait until he finishes his conference with Mr. Schultz."

Pat stood up slowly. He dropped his cigarette to the floor and ground it out with the toe of his boot. He said gravely, "I reckon I don't feel like waitin', ma'am. I've come a long way to see him."

"But I'm quite sure he won't want to be disturbed."

"An' I am quite sure he's going to be whether he wants it that way or not."

She jumped up, dismayed by his manner. "Give me your name and I'll see."

"Pat Stevens . . . from Powder Valley."

She said, "Oh!" and hesitated, then compressed her lips and hurried into the private office. She came back, closing the door firmly behind her.

She shook her head at Pat. "I'm afraid it won't be any use for you to wait. Mr. Biloff will be too busy all day to see anyone."

Pat said, "He'll see me." He started for the door.

Gertie pressed back against the partition to get out of his way. Pat jerked the door open and walked in, the high heels of his boots thudding loudly on the floor.

10

JUDSON BILOFF AND SCHULTZ WERE seated on opposite sides of a wide flat-topped desk. Schultz had his brief case open beside him and was spreading legal documents out before Biloff.

The president of the Colorado Western Land and Development Company was seated in a swivel chair thoughtfully fingering a long cigar. He drew his dark brows together angrily when the man from Powder Valley strode into his private office. He snapped, "I told my secretary I wasn't to be disturbed," biting off the words with his thin lips working like the jaws of a steel trap.

Pat Stevens said, "That's too damn bad, Mr. Biloff. I'm just a cowman without no bringing-up an' you'll have to excuse my rudeness." He walked forward slowly, his boot heels sinking into the deep pile of the office carpet.

Pat's soft tone did not deceive the land company president. Long experience in dealing with the big-hatted and booted men of the range had taught him they were most dangerous when apparently the mildest. He rocked back in his swivel chair and said placatingly:

"Well, well. Mr. Stevens, isn't it? I believe we've met."

"Yeh. In Powder Valley."

"Quite so. Meet my right-hand man, Mr. Stevens. Mr. Schultz is just back from Kansas with a splendid report of progress there."

Pat wasted a brief nod on Schultz. "I reckon you sold Mr. Hartsell his place?"

"Hartsell?" Schultz frowned. "There have been so many . . ."

Pat said, "No matter." He turned his attention back to Biloff. "I came to Denver to tell you some things."

"No doubt you ranchers are greatly pleased with the progress we're making. Mr. Culver, my engineer in charge, reports that excavations for the dam are already beginning. Most gratifying."

Pat planted his feet wide apart in the soft carpet by the side of the financier's desk. He rumbled, "Is that all Culver reports? Nothin' about the way we feel in the Valley?"

"There was some nonsense about local opposition in the beginning," Biloff admitted. "But Culver's later reports indicate all that has disappeared."

Pat said, "His reports lie." He hesitated a moment, then explained, "We'll never see Powder Creek dammed, Biloff. It'll ruin the valley for cattle. You know that. You knew it when you tricked us into selling our land."

Biloff smiled thinly. "That's a childish attitude to adopt. You few ranchers can't stand in the way of modern progress. The day of the huge cattle domains is ended. You've got to realize . . ."

"Powder Creek will never be dammed," Pat repeated with emphasis.

The smile went away from Biloff's lips and they curled back to show his two gold teeth. "I'm afraid that's not for you to decide, Mr. Stevens. We have a perfect legal right to develop our property as we see fit."

"Property you stole from us."

"Property to which we have a legal title," Biloff corrected him.

"But you know how you got it. By lying. By telling each one of us you wanted his one or two sections for raising blooded hawses. When you was buying that land you never once mentioned it was for a land company."

"A man may do what he wishes with his own property," said Biloff. "I changed my mind about raising blooded stock after realizing the tremendous potentialities in the valley."

"You planned it from the beginning," Pat charged angrily. "You meant to bring in farmers all the time you were tricking us."

Biloff shrugged his shoulders scornfully. "Isn't that beside the point . . . if there *is* any point in this discussion?"

Pat drew in a deep breath. He reached in his pocket for cigarette papers and sack of tobacco. "We'll skip that part of it," he agreed. "We'll say you got a legal right to build the dam and sell the land out to farmers. That don't mean you can do it."

"What's to prevent us?"

"There's still guns in Powder Valley . . . an' men to use them." Pat's drawl was more pronounced. His gray eyes were cold and hard.

"That's utter nonsense," Biloff declared. "It's practically a threat of rebellion."

"I reckon it is." Pat had his cigarette made. He cupped his hands over a lighted match and drew smoke into his lungs.

"But that's preposterous. No one group of men can set themselves up to thwart the processes of constituted authority."

"Them are big words, Mister. I ain't sure I know what all of them mean. But I'm right sure you know what I mean."

"You can't come here with threats or coercion," Biloff snapped.

"I ain't. I'm telling you facts. There'll never be a dam across Powder Creek. There'll never be irrigation ditches carrying our water. You're lying to those farmers when you promise them those things."

"Be careful of your words," said Biloff.

Pat laughed softly. It wasn't a pleasant sound in the luxurious office. "I stopped twenty armed men that were ridin' to burn out the first settler last night, Biloff. A

Kansas farmer with a wife an' three kids. He came to Powder Valley expectin' to raise a crop to feed those kids on. You know it can't be done. You know the early frost'll nip anything he plants. If they don't get driven out . . . they'll starve out. It'll be murder either way . . . an' you'll be the murderer."

A sneer distorted Judson Biloff's saturnine face. "What happens to them after they get there is not my responsibility."

"You mean you don't care what happens to 'em?"

"I mean I'm not responsible." Biloff pounded the desk with his clenched fist.

In a wondering tone, Pat said, "You know they can't farm that land. You've known it all along."

"I'm not a farmer."

"You are lower than a snake's belly, Biloff," said Pat. "Good God! I thought maybe if I came here and told you how it was you'd stop sellin' the land to farmers. But I ain't telling you anything you don't already know."

"Nothing you have to say interests me, Stevens. You've taken up quite enough of my time. Get out."

Pat did not move. His eyes were very bright. He said, "Why, no. I'm stayin'. But I reckon you're right. I've plumb talked enough." He leaned forward and slapped the financier with such force that Biloff floundered backward in his swivel chair, went to the floor in an undignified heap.

Pat strode around the desk, gritting his teeth. He said, "That's a beginnin', Biloff. Just a sample." He leaned over and grabbed the president's thin shoulder, dragged him to his feet. He didn't notice Schultz running out the door behind him.

Pat hit him in the face with his doubled fist, holding him aloft like a limp doll. "This is something I've been hankerin' to do for a long time," he said happily. He smashed his fist into Biloff's face again.

The president tried to scream for help. Pat slapped

him across the mouth as he got it open. "There's just the two of us," Pat told him. "You an' me to settle this *my* way."

But he was mistaken. The door burst open under the rush of two blue-uniformed policemen followed by the panting and perspiring Mr. Schultz.

Pat let go of Biloff with a grunt of disgust as the police ran up and caught hold of each arm. "Mighta known it'd be like this in the city . . ."

"Hold that man, officers. Handcuff him," Biloff shouted from the floor. "He's a dangerous maniac."

Pat stood quietly in the grip of the city policemen. He laughed at Biloff who staggered to his feet holding a handkerchief to his bruised and bleeding face. "It was worth whatever the fine'll be," he asserted cheerfully. "An' I'm going to have fun tellin' the judge just why I took a poke at you."

"Come along quietly," one of the policemen ordered gruffly. "You're not riding the range in Denver."

"Wait a minute, officers." Biloff spoke with a painful grimace that tried to be a reassuring smile. "I guess there's no need to arrest that man. Just . . . er . . . a personal quarrel. Take him outside and we'll drop the matter."

"You mean that, Mister? After the way he beat you up?"

"It's really nothing. Ha-ha. Nothing that nature can't patch up. I prefer not to have him prosecuted."

"Just as you say, Mister. If you won't swear out a warrant, we'll have to turn him loose I reckon. Mighty funny business, though."

Pat let them lead him out the outer office and down the stairs. When they reached the street one of the officers advised him in a kindly tone, "Better get out of town before Mr. Biloff changes his mind. That'd cost you ten dollars and costs in police court."

Pat said, "It would be worth it."

They let him go with a disapproving shake of their heads against the procedure, and Pat strode back to the Oxford Hotel where he learned that the next southbound train left the depot at five o'clock.

He was all in after a sleepless night, and the reaction from his burst of anger at Biloff had left him feeling weak and disgusted with himself. His trip to the city had accomplished absolutely nothing. He had made a fool of himself, and that was about all. His only desire was to get out of town and back to Powder Valley where he belonged.

He remembered he had paid for a room in the hotel, so he went up to lie down, leaving word at the desk that he should be called at four-thirty if he happened to drop off to sleep.

He didn't think he would. He never slept in the daytime. But there was something soporific in the city sounds that drifted up from the street as he tossed restlessly on the bed. He kept slipping into the clutches of uneasy slumber and then coming back to wakefulness with a start—until suddenly he was recalled to consciousness by a heavy pounding on the door of his room.

He sat up and stared about him for a moment without being able to remember where he was. The knocking continued. Things came back to him with a rush and he went to the door and opened it.

A bell-boy stood outside, and to Pat's great surprise informed him it was four-thirty. It seemed to Pat he hadn't slept more than five minutes at any one stretch.

He grabbed his hat and hurried out with the haste of a man unused to city ways and afraid of missing his train.

He was striding through the lobby toward the Seventeenth Street entrance when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

Pat swung around and looked into the face of a com-

plete stranger. The man was a head shorter than he, heavy-set, wearing city clothes and aggressively chewing the butt of a cigar. He had keen eyes and a stolid, square chin. He said, "Mr. Stevens. I believe," before Pat could say anything.

The rancher nodded. "Yep. I'm Stevens."

"From Powder Valley?" The stranger kept his hand on Pat's shoulder. Another, smaller man, was sidling up beside him.

Pat sad, "What the hell is this? Sure, I'm Pat Stevens from Powder Valley."

"That's all we want to know," the heavy-set man growled. "Come along with us." His thick fingers tightened on Pat's shoulder.

Anger blazed in Pat's eyes. He put the flat of his palm against the man's chest and shoved, said between his teeth, "I'm catching a train."

The man didn't budge. People in the lobby were beginning to collect, staring at the scene curiously. The big man said to his smaller companion, "Put the bracelets on him, Malloy," and added to Pat, "We're the police." With his free hand he flipped back the lapel of his coat to let Pat see his badge.

Pat froze in his tracks. The little man was unobtrusively getting a pair of shiny handcuffs from his hip pocket. Pat said, "The police? But . . . I thought . . ."

"You thought you'd get away with it? Nope. They want to talk to you at headquarters."

Malloy snapped the handcuffs on Pat's wrists. He said, "You'll be all right, fella, if you got an alibi for this afternoon." They got on each side of him and started for the door.

"An alibi?"

"Sure. You know. If you can prove where you were while Mr. Judson Biloff was getting kidnaped an' maybe murdered."

"Kidnaped? Murdered?" Pat choked over the words.

"Don't play innocent. We know all about you . . . all about that fight you had with him this morning."

"But I've been up in my room . . . asleep."

The big man laughed. "Anybody to swear to that?"

Pat's wits were beginning to work again. Something had happened to Biloff and *he* was suspected. He said, "The clerk knows when I went up to bed. And the bellboy just woke me."

The men looked at each other and laughed as they reached the sidewalk.

"That's an old dodge," Malloy chuckled. "Looks like you were tryin' to fix yourself an alibi. You got no proof you were *in* your room all that time. We got a nice patrol wagon waitin' to take you for a ride."

11

AS SAM AND EZRA RODE AWAY FROM Pat after he announced his intention of going to Denver alone, the big, one-eyed man growled at Sam:

"Wa'n't no need fer you to stick yore elbow plumb through my ribs back yonder to make me shut up. I don't see no reason why Pat should have all the fun of a city trip by hisself."

"You know how subborn Pat is. No use arguin' with him oncet he's got his mind sot."

"Still an' all, it ain't right," Ezra complained. "Three of us together, now, we might get somewhere's with Biloff. You an' me know some argyments a gent like him might understand. I still think we oughtta made Pat take us along." Ezra heaved a deep, reminiscent sigh. "We ain't seen the city lights fer quite a spell. When you menshuned that redheaded gal on Larimer Street, I got rememberin' . . ."

"I knowed that was a mistake as soon as I said it,"

Sam cut in sharply. "Get this through yore thick haid right now . . . we're stayin' away from Larimer Street when we hit Denver. This ain't no time for thinkin' about gals . . . redhaided or bald ones."

Ezra's big mouth sagged open in the starlight. He sputtered, "When we hit Denver? But you tol' Pat . . ."

"Like I say . . . it ain't no good arguin' with Pat. Let him think he's got us buffaloed an' we're stayin' here meek an' quiet like a couple of bobtailed lambs. Then he won't be watchin' when we trail him to Denver an' keep him out of trouble."

"By golly, Sam, that'll be a good one on him," Ezra chortled. "But how'll we do it? We cain't make that ride before he's got there an' gone by' train. An' he'll shore spot us if we try to get on at Hopewell Junction with him."

"I got that all figgered out. Happens Jeff Conroy is shippin' some yearlin's to Denver tomorrow. Jeff'll deadhead us in the caboose like a couple of hands if we ask him to. We'll be on the same train but Pat'll never know it."

Ezra laughed thunderously and slapped his thigh. "That's the ticket! Like when Pat was headin' after them black-masks up Dusty Canyon. Pat was mighty glad we trailed him *that* time, you betcha."

"We'll ride over to Jeff Conroy's 'fore daylight an' go into the Junction with him. All we gotta do is keep outta sight till Pat gets aboard."

It was a good plan, and it worked just as Sam had predicted. Conroy was glad to have their company on the trip, and he willingly took them along instead of two of his own men. From their seat on the top rail of the loading pens, they watched Pat swing aboard to his seat in the coach, and when the train pulled out of Hopewell Junction they were in the caboose at the end.

But a miscalculation occurred in Pueblo. When Pat's coach was switched onto the main-line passenger train

to Denver, they were left behind with their cattle cars to wait for a freight that pulled out later. For that reason, they didn't reach Denver until almost noon of the second day.

They hopped off the caboose as the train entered the yards, and hurried toward the business section of the city filled with a deep foreboding that they had arrived too late to help Pat in his interview with Judson Biloff.

People turned to stare at the pair as they thumped up the sidewalk in their high-heeled boots. Both wore regular range attire and their appearance hadn't been helped any by the long trip in the freight caboose. There was a sprouting of fiery red whiskers on Ezra's scarred face, and his one eye gleamed malevolently at passers-by from a socket that was red-rimmed with sleeplessness. His huge frame dwarfed the wiry figure of Sam Sloan, who had to take two steps to Ezra's one to keep up.

Sam's dark countenance was drawn in tight lines beneath the floppy brim of his Stetson. Stained with soot and cinders, his black eyes darting about suspiciously at the strange faces and sights of the city, his appearance was so much like that of a stage desperado that many of the city dwellers stepped aside to give him plenty of room as he went past. Both men had worn their guns in open holsters, though that, in itself, would not have occasioned comment in the city where half the population carried guns either openly or in concealed holsters.

Sam had gotten the address of Judson Biloff's office before leaving Dutch Springs. He inquired the way to the Exchange Building from a newsboy near the railroad yards, and they headed up Seventeenth Street after getting directions.

"Not that it'll do any good, most like," Sam admitted irritably to Ezra. "Pat's been in town all mornin' an' he'll shore have seen Biloff by now. Best we can do is find out what happened."

"An' mebby wring Biloff's neck if he didn't make a deal with Pat," Ezra suggested hopefully. "That's what we come fer, ain't it?"

"It sure ain't," Sam warned him. "Don't you start nothin', Ezra. We come to help Pat. Won't help him none if you get throwed in the hoosegow."

"These here Denver police are mostly little fellers," Ezra argued. "I reckon you an' me could handle five or six of 'em."

"Yeh, an' they got five or six hundred ready fer a riot call," Sam snapped. "You let me do the talkin', Ezra. We got to first find out where Pat's at an' whether he's done any good. Don't you start nothin', no matter what happens."

They reached the entrance to the Exchange Building just as the noon-hour exodus of office workers began.

With men and girls streaming out of the door, they stood back abashed, waiting for the stream to thin so they could get through to go in.

While they stood there, a two-seated carriage drew up at the curb opposite the entrance. A Negro coachman in a plum-colored uniform drove a team of matched bays. The equipage glittered with fresh paint and shining brass, evidently awaiting the emergence of some wealthy man from the office building.

Suddenly, Sam started violently and whispered to Ezra, "Ain't that him comin' through the door? All dressed up fit to kill . . . but that's Jud Biloff . . . the same that pertended to be a hawse raiser when he bought our sections in Powder Valley."

Ezra's one eye glowed with hatred as it rested on the tall, impeccably dressed figure of the land-company president. He muttered, "Yep. That's him, Sam. Lord A'mighty! look at his face. Looks like he'd done tangled with a black b'ar."

Pat's fists had left purple bruises on Biloff's face, a

split lip that was mended with a small piece of court plaster.

Sam stepped forward and intercepted the tall man as he strode toward the curb. He caught his arm and said, "You're Jud Biloff, ain't you?"

Judson Biloff's lips twitched as he looked down and recognized another of the Powder Valley ranchers whom he had cheated in the land deal. This man, he realized at a glance, was really a dangerous character. Different from the Stevens fellow who had visited him that morning. The gun on Sam's hip was worn as though he knew how to use it, and there was something altogether terrifying in the dark dirty face that stared up at him.

"I am," he admitted testily. "What has that to do with you?"

"Mebby you don't remember me. Name's Sam Sloan . . . from Powder Valley."

"Ah, yes." Biloff remembered Sam at once. He lived alone with a one-eyed partner, and they both had a wide reputation for reckless lawlessness. They were particular friends of Pat Stevens, he believed, and a tremor of angry fear ran over his long, thin body.

"I remember you," Biloff went on. "Yes, indeed. Ha-ha. Pleasant meeting you here like this, but I have an engagement . . ." He turned as though to go on.

Sam's fingers caught his arm. "I'm wonderin' if you've talked to Pat Stevens yet?"

Biloff's black eyes flashed angrily. "I talked to him. Yes."

Sam drawled, "I reckoned mebbe you had. Looks like you an' Pat had a argyment an' you come out second best," with a shrewd look at Biloff's face.

"The man came to my office and threatened me . . . had the audacity to use physical violence in an attempt to enforce an outrageous demand," Biloff explained angrily.

Sam nodded and let go of his arm. "An' you yelled fer help from the *po*-lice, I reckon?"

"I certainly stood upon my rights as a citizen . . . though I did refuse to swear out a warrant and have him jailed."

"An' Pat went on home?"

"I presume so." Biloff's thin lips curled away from his teeth. "He didn't return to my office after being thrown out."

"An' you ain't gonna do nothin' about the farmers an' the dam?" Sam guessed in an ominously placid tone. "Even after Pat put it to you straight that it's downright stealin' to take money fer them farms that'll never be irrigated."

"Watch your words," Biloff warned him. "I am a man of long patience, but it is practically exhausted. You men can't come to the city and threaten me with guns. I have only to raise my voice for the police to have you jailed."

"I reckon yo're right at that." Sam stepped back and nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir, looks like you hold all five aces right in yore hand. Pat was a fool to think you'd listen to reason. Yo're a thief, an' proud of it. An' after word gets back to the Valley, you'll be a murderer to boot."

Biloff sneered at him and said, "I've warned you for the last time not to interfere with me." He turned and stalked to the curb, stepped into the rear seat of the waiting carriage and the Negro coachman drove the spirited team away with a flourish.

Sam turned to Ezra shaking his head, his face dour with anger. "Pat's been to see him an' done gone home," he reported. "Had a fight an' Pat put them bruises on his face, but that's all the good his trip did."

"Biloff ain't gonna do nothin', huh? Whyn't you let me git my hands around his scrawny neck, Sam? Damn him, I'd have . . ."

"No." Sam shook his head sourly. "There's more ways of killin' a cat than by chokin' it to death on sour cream," he stated. "We let Pat have his crack at Biloff like he wanted. Now . . . we'll see how *my* idee works."

"You got an idee?" Ezra queried happily.

"You bet I have . . . an' it's a humdinger. I figger if we can get Biloff out of Denver an' down to Powder Valley where there ain't no *po*-lice, we might could reason with him a little."

"Yeh, but I reckon he knows better'n to get out of the city," Ezra said doubtfully.

"That's where my plan comes in. Doggone it, Pat Stevens ain't the only one that can do brainwork." Sam caught Ezra's arm and urged him along the street. "Le's find us a saloon where they sell whisky cheap an' I'll tell yuh how we're gonna persuade Biloff to go back with us."

Sam Sloan and Ezra sat together with their heads close at a rear table in a Broadway saloon while the waiter refilled their whisky glasses a great many times. Sam talked persuasively and Ezra's booming laughter evidenced complete approval of his partner's words.

They were both sober enough to walk without staggering when they left the saloon a couple of hours later. Sam stopped at a little store on Broadway and bought a box of shoe blacking. The proprietor stared at his unpolished boots curiously, but asked no questions.

At the corner of Broadway and Fifteenth Street, they stopped a prosperous-looking gentleman and asked if he could direct them to the home of Mr. Judson Biloff. The man had heard of Mr. Biloff, but did not know where he lived. However, he kindly offered to help the men who were obvious strangers to the city; and he, in turn, called a blue-coated policeman and repeated their question.

The policeman knew exactly where Mr. Biloff lived.

He gave them a Capitol Hill address, on Logan Street three blocks south of the gold-domed capitol building. They thanked the policeman and the kindly gentleman, and walked up past the capitol building and south on Logan Street.

The address was an imposing white brick residence with two stories and many cupolas. There was a broad stretch of lawn and a private stable in the rear. They sauntered around to the stable and found the Negro coachman polishing the brass lamps of the carriage Biloff had ridden away in at noon.

The coachman told them his name was Jake. He had a wide-mouthed smile for the two cowmen who engaged him in such pleasant conversation. He admitted he liked working for Biloff because his employer was such a "gentleman." The team of bays stood in their stalls munching hay with only their bridles removed. Jake told them he had to go back to the office for Mr. Biloff at "Four o'clock on the dot," and he flourished a big gold watch to show them it lacked only half an hour of the appointed time.

Sam said, "Awright, Jake," and drew his gun.

The Negro backed away, rolling the whites of his eyes in terror when Sam rammed the muzzle into his stomach.

Sam said, "You ain't goin' to get hurt if you get back into the stables an' keep yore mouth shut," and Ezra stepped forward to enforce the order by clamping a huge hand over the coachman's mouth.

They pushed him inside the stable swiftly and made him strip off his plum-colored coachman's livery.

Ezra held a gun on him while Sam divested himself of jeans and shirt and got into the Negro's clothes. They were a little too large, and Ezra had difficulty controlling his laughter when the peaked cap slid down over Sam's eyes, but they decided the fit was good enough.

They let Jake get into Sam's discarded shirt and jeans,

and then tied him firmly to a post, gagging him with a red bandanna. Sam had to discard his gun belt, but slid his .45 inside the waistband of the uniform. The tight jacket came down low enough to hide the butt from view.

While Ezra hitched the team to the fancy carriage, Sam opened the box of shoe blacking and daubed it liberally on his face and hands.

When he came out of the stable and crawled up on the front seat to take the lines, Ezra doubled over with laughter.

"By Gawd, Sam, I swear I'd hire you for my coachman was I a big city rich man. I allus wondered didn't you have negro blood in you, but now I know. No man could look that much like a Negro without bein' at least part."

Sam smiled grimly from beneath the peaked brim of his uniform cap. "I feel like a dressed-up jay-bird," he muttered. "Damn you, Ezra, if you don't quit laughin' I'll crawl down from here an' bust you one."

Ezra gritted his teeth and stopped laughing. "You'd best be gettin' along. Yore boss'll be waitin'."

Sam said, "You know where to meet me . . . on the road south of town toward Littleton. More'n likely I'll come a-hellin'," he ended grimly.

"I'll be along there watchin' fer you," Ezra assured him. He started laughing again as Sam cracked the whip over the bays and they arched their necks and pranced away. Doggone old Sam, he certainly was one for thinkin' up idees. This was as good as any dodge Pat had *ever* worked when the goin' was tough and brainwork had to take the place of force.

Sam had to wait five minutes at the curb outside the Exchange Building before Biloff came out. He was accompanied by a short fat man who carried a leather brief case and wore an ingratiating smile along with his checked suit.

Sam had a bad moment when Schultz came to the

curb with the president. He thought he planned to get in the back seat with Biloff, and Sam hadn't planned on that.

But they stopped at the curb for a moment and talked earnestly, then Biloff got in and Schultz started to turn away.

He stopped, staring at Sam, who had his head ducked down and turned away.

"What happened to Jake?" Schultz asked. "I didn't know you had a new coachman."

Biloff started to say, "I haven't," but he took a closer look at the masquerading rancher and let out a loud squawk. "See here! What's this . . ."

Then Schultz, on the sidewalk, beheld an amazing sight. The Negro coachman drew a long-barreled .45 from his waistband and turned a black, glowering face toward the man in the rear seat. He heard the black lips snarl, "Sit tight an' you won't get killed," to Biloff in a menacing voice that didn't have a trace of Negro accent; then the team was sent away sharply and the carriage careened up Seventeenth Street.

Schultz dropped his brief case and ran, shouting at the top of his voice, "Help! Police, murder! Help, police!"

12

PAT TRIED TO PROTEST BUT THE TWO policemen hustled him into a waiting patrol wagon at the curb. It pulled away with the clatter of iron-rimmed wheels on the cobblestones and the loud clanging of a bell.

Pat was wedged between his two captors in the back seat with his wrists handcuffed together in front of him. He stared straight ahead so he wouldn't have to meet the curious and accusing eyes of people on the streets who turned to look as the police patrol clattered past.

He kept his mouth grimly shut during the ride to the police station. He knew there wasn't any use protesting his innocence to Malloy and his companion. The two officers had orders to arrest him, and they were merely doing their duty.

He realized that fate had caught him in a neat trap, though he did not yet know how strong a case of circumstantial evidence there was against him. He couldn't *prove* he had stayed in his hotel room all afternoon. No one was likely to believe he had gone upstairs and fallen asleep. It was an unlikely thing for an out-of-town visitor to do. Without knowing anything about what had actually happened to Biloff, the words "kidnaped" and "murdered" kept ringing with ugly emphasis through Pat's mind.

He knew he had to keep calm, though the impulse toward panic was strong within him. He felt utterly helpless and alone in the city, and he recalled all the stories he had heard of the brutal methods used by the police to extract confessions from prisoners whom they suspected of major crimes.

There was no one to come to his aid, no one to believe him when he told the truth. His own quick temper had brought this upon him, he realized ruefully. Because he had attacked Biloff with his fists that morning, he was a logical suspect when something later happened to the land-company president. Still, it seemed to Pat the man must surely have other enemies in the city. He relaxed and grew calmer as he considered his position. Probably the police were just rounding up all the men in the city known to have a grudge against Biloff.

He was poised and calm when the wagon clattered into the courtyard by the side of the police building and he was ordered to get out. If he kept his wits about him he felt sure he could convince a fair-minded man of his innocence.

With a policeman on each side of him, he was ushered through a narrow door and up a dark corridor to a large room at the front of the building. Though it was still sunlight outside, gas lights flickered from a ceiling chandelier. The bare pine floor was scuffed and worn by the dragging feet of thousands of offenders. There was a row of wooden chairs bolted against one wall, and at the opposite side of the room a heavy-jowled man in an untidy uniform sat behind a wide bare desk.

He scowled at Malloy and said with satisfaction, "Got him, huh?"

"Yep." Malloy led Pat Stevens forward to stand in front of the desk. "Just as he was fixing to make his getaway. He started to resist arrest so we had to put the bracelets on him."

Pat said, "Now, look here," but the desk sergeant snarled, "Shut up, you. Wait till you're spoken to."

Pat compressed his lips and stared over the sergeant's head at a cobwebbed window in the brick wall behind him. The rays of the sun were trying to come through the cobwebs and grime, but were finding it difficult. Pat had a feeling the dismal room had never felt the cleansing warmth of the sun. There was a damp, unhealthy smell in his nostrils, and he caught himself sinking into the apathy of a condemned man.

The sergeant was chewing on a penholder and writing in a ledger in front of him. He asked, "What's your right name?"

"Pat Stevens."

He muttered, "Patrick," and wrote it down. "Middle name?"

"Just Pat Stevens." Pat leaned forward over the desk. "You got no right to put me down in that book," he protested. "What am I charged with? Who says I've done anything?"

"Home address?" grunted the sergeant.

"Powder Valley. I've been up in my room sleeping all afternoon . . ."

Without looking up, the sergeant said, "Bring in the witness, Joe."

The burly man who stood beside Pat nodded and went into another room. Pat turned his head and saw him coming back with the land salesman whom he had met in Biloff's office that morning.

Mr. Schultz was evidently enjoying his importance as principal witness to the crime against the person of his employer. His fat face was flushed with righteous indignation and he stopped in the doorway to dramatically point a pudgy forefinger at Pat Stevens.

"That's him," he declared. "That's the scoundrel. Tried to murder Mr. Biloff with his two hands this morning after threatening him with blackmail and worse."

Pat said to the sergeant, "I'm not denyin' I had a fight with Biloff this mornin'. But he told the police he wouldn't swear out a warrant. Shucks, if I'd knowed you wanted me for that . . ."

"That's true." Schultz bustled forward excitedly. "Mr. Biloff refused to prosecute this ruffian out of the kindness of his heart. A fine repayment he got for his generosity." He planted himself in front of Pat on his bandy legs. "What have you done with Mr. Biloff? What terrible thing have you done since your accomplice kidnaped him?"

Pat turned disgustedly to the sergeant. "I wish people would stop yapping an' tell me what this is all about. What's this talk about kidnaping?"

"You're a cool customer," the sergeant complimented him. "Damned if you ain't." He rocked back in his chair and nodded slowly. "Trying to make out you don't know nothing about it, hey?"

Pat said, "I've been asleep all afternoon."

"Except during the time you were out at Mr. Biloff's

house tying up his coachman and making your plans to kidnap him. You're not going to claim you were asleep while you were doing *that,* are you? Ha-ha-ha. Maybe you are, at that."

"Of course he's guilty," Schultz expostulated. "Didn't the Negro say there was a big man with the one who traded clothes with him? Both of them wearing big hats and boots and Western clothes. There's no doubt this man planned it all after I foiled his plan to murder Mr. Biloff this morning. Why don't you make him tell what's happened to Mr. Biloff? Every minute may be important. Perhaps he's being tortured this very instant."

"We'll find Biloff. Don't you worry about that. When the coachman gets over his scare enough so he can talk sensible and come down to identify the prisoner, we'll have an open-and-shut case. Then we'll go to work on him," the sergeant promised grimly.

"In the meantime, think of the danger Mr. Biloff is in," Schultz cried.

"In the meantime, we got no proof this man was mixed up in it," the sergeant told him sternly. "We'll hold him on suspicion . . . that's the best we can do."

"Proof?" screeched Schultz. "What better proof do you want?"

"We'll run the police business," the sergeant told him coldly. "You better run along and sell your farms."

"I'll see a lawyer," Schultz declared. "I'll see the judge. I'll report this incompetence to the papers."

The sergeant said, "Go on. No one's stopping you."

Mr. Schultz went out, breathing hard and muttering loudly.

"Now," said Pat, "can I have the straight of this?"

The desk sergeant fixed him with a cold eye. "Don't go getting any idea you're in the clear. You look guilty as hell from where I sit. But I don't like no one telling me how to run my business."

"You said something about a Negro coachman identi-

fyin' me," Pat protested. "The sooner he don't do it the sooner you'll turn me loose."

"I've got a man out there now trying to talk to him. The poor guy was scared so he couldn't hardly talk when you and your friend threw down on him with your guns."

Pat squinted at the sergeant. He said, "It won't hurt to tell me what happened, will it?"

"I don't think I'll be telling you anything you don't know, so I guess it won't hurt," the sergeant agreed.

He gave Pat a graphic account of Schultz's story of the actual kidnaping of Judson Biloff. "Last trace we had of the surrey it was going south hell-bent towards Littleton with your black-up pal in the driver's seat waving his gun and shooting in the air to get people out of his way. But he never got to Littleton. Turned off somewhere. You feel like telling us about it?"

Pat shook his head stubbornly. "I was asleep in bed when that was happening."

The sergeant nodded amiably. "We sent a man out to Mr. Biloff's house and he found Jake, the coachman, tied up in the stable dressed in a puncher's blue jeans and a flannel shirt. He was too scared to tell a straight story, but raved about a big man and little one . . . both dressed like you are . . . that ganged up on him and stole his uniform. The little one put it on and blacked up his face and drove off to kidnap Mr. Biloff. The darky don't know where the big fellow went . . . back to the Oxford Hotel to pretend to be asleep, I reckon."

Pat pounded the desk with his manacled hands. "I don't know anything about it. Take me out to the Negro and he'll tell you I ain't the man."

"Well, now . . ." The sergeant rubbed his blunt chin and considered the request.

Pat straightened up as he waited for the sergeant's answer. He glanced at the window in front of him, and his tall body stiffened.

Framed by the cobwebs and dimly discernible through the accumulated dirt on the glass, he glimpsed a terrifying face with a single eye that stared directly into his.

It was Ezra, crouched close to the window and watching the scene inside the room with intense interest.

The big redheaded man screwed his whiskered face up into a grin of encouragement when he knew that Pat saw him.

Pat shook his head violently, lifted his wrists to let Ezra see the shiny handcuffs and to discourage him from doing anything rash.

Pat saw it all, now. Sam and Ezra must have followed him to Denver, learned somehow of his failure to budge Biloff by argument, and taken matters into their own hands.

The crazy, damn fools! Still, he felt a grudging surge of admiration for them. They had planned a slick trick, all right. And it had worked thus far. Only a couple of wild fools would have dared to kidnap an important financier from in front of his downtown office. From the beginning, this fear had lurked in the background of Pat's thoughts. It had sounded like something only Sam and Ezra could dream up.

Ezra moved away from the window. Pat realized that his face was bathed with cold sweat. He prayed that Ezra would slip on away unobserved. Things might work out yet, if Ezra would use some common sense.

With a start, he realized that the sergeant was speaking, "I guess that's a fair enough thing to ask, Stevens. If you're guilty, the Negro will say so . . . and if you're not the man, well, we don't want to hold you. You take him, Malloy . . ."

He was interrupted by the entrance of a trim young officer who burst in excitedly, "Hey, Sarge. I've got a description of those men. A good one that ought to be worth something."

"You been talking to that coachman, eh?" the sergeant asked.

"Yes, sir. I fed him a big drink of brandy and got him so he could talk straight again. The smaller man was about his size, dark complexion, crooked nose, black eyes. . . ."

"How about the big fellow?" the sergeant demanded. "He's the one I'm interested in right now. You get anything definite on him?"

"You bet I did. Plenty. He won't be hard to recognize. From the way Jake describes him, he's really big. Damn near a giant. Red hair and red whiskers. Got a scarred face and only one eye . . ."

The dismayed expression on the sergeant's face stopped the eager young policeman. The sergeant looked at Malloy and repeated, "Red hair . . . one eye." He shrugged, smiled at Pat Stevens for the first time. "Looks like that clears you, Mister. Sorry we made a mistake, but you can see how things were."

"Sure. No hard feelin's," Pat assured him. He wanted desperately to get away from that room and try to reach Ezra outside. He turned to Malloy, holding out his arms, "I reckon you've got the key to these dinguses?"

The sergeant nodded to Malloy. "Unlock the tinware. We've got nothing to hold him on."

Malloy took a small flat key from his pocket. He inserted it in the left cuff and released the spring lock. The jaws sprang open and slid off Pat's left wrist.

A loud commotion in the hallway drew their attention. Pat groaned aloud as the door burst open to admit the huge figure of Ezra brandishing a cocked .45. He was hatless and his red hair caught the light from the gas jets overhead. His one eye gleamed menacingly around the room as he boomed, "First man moves gets a chunk of lead in his belly."

13

THE YOUNG OFFICER RETREATED, staring at Ezra with bugging eyes. He muttered, "Red hair and one eye. Jehosaphat! That's *him*."

Malloy was bent half over by Pat's side. He took in the situation with one darting glance, then dived behind the sergeant's desk, going for his gun.

Ezra threw lead at Malloy to prove his threat had been wholly serious. The slug nicked a corner of the desk, missing Malloy by an inch.

Pat dived sideways on top of Malloy with the handcuffs still dangling from his right wrist. He got hold of the policeman's revolver and wrested it from his grip, arose from behind the desk to see that Ezra had the other two officers covered.

But there were excited shouts and the sound of pounding feet outside the office, reinforcements attracted by the loud explosion of Ezra's gun.

Pat leaped forward toward the outer door, panting, "C'mon, Ezra. We got to get out fast."

Ezra hesitated a moment, then lumbered after him.

Two uniformed men were coming through the door as Pat and Ezra burst out. They shouted an alarm and tugged at their service revolvers. Pat struck one a flailing blow with the handcuff swinging from his wrist, and Ezra simply ran over the other one, trampling him to the courtyard.

Pat half turned as he ran and threw two bullets back at the door through which they had just emerged. He aimed high to avoid killing a policeman, and the bullets struck the door casing, a grim warning to those inside the office to stay inside.

They crossed the courtyard to an alley and were hid-

den from the police station by a high stone wall. Pat stuck Malloy's gun out of sight in his waistband and told Ezra to do likewise with his. Then he hid his right hand deep in the pocket of his leather jacket, cramming the dangling cuff inside, out of sight.

At the end of the alley they came out into a narrow street in the wholesale district crowded with vans and loaded wagons. There were shouts of pursuit turning into the alley behind them.

Pat grabbed Ezra's arm and steered his big companion to the loading platform at the rear of one of the buildings. A brawny Irishman was trundling wooden cases from the interior of the building onto a wagon fitted with high sideboards. He grinned widely at the two fugitives as blue-coated pursuers burst out of the alley. He grunted, "Into the wagon with you and lay flat."

They leaped over the tailboard and crouched on the floor out of sight. The Irishman phlegmatically trundled his heavy cases forward and started piling them on the floor of the wagon behind Pat and Ezra.

Two policemen ran up, shouting excitedly, "Have you seen two men running this way? They're dangerous criminals."

He shook his head, spat over the side of the wagon to show his disdain of uniformed authority. He rumbled, "Dangerous criminals, be they? The likes of that I've not seen this day."

The two policemen hesitated an instant, then trotted on to continue the search. Their rescuer grinned down at the two men from Powder Valley and winked knowingly with a broad grin.

"Bad cess to the coppers, say I! Do they think Mike Clancy is a man to help them in their dirty worrk?" He continued to pile the cases up behind Pat and Ezra, forming a waist-high barricade to hide them effectually as long as they kept their heads down.

"Dangerous criminals, is it?" Clancy muttered. "Two that've had a nip too much would be my guess."

"We're strangers in Denver," Pat told him. "The police have got us mixed up with a couple of other fellows. All we want is a chance to get out of town."

Clancy nodded. "And that chance you'll get," he told them cheerily. " 'Tis little love I have for the blue-coats. Keep yourselves down and stay quiet till I finish my loading job. I'll drive you away safe and no one the wiser."

He pushed his hand-truck back into the building for another load of cases and Pat and Ezra settled themselves as comfortably as they could in the narrow space between tiers of boxes.

Ezra drew in a huge sigh of relief and grinned down at Pat. He rumbled hoarsely, "I ain't had time to say howdy, Mr. Stevens. Who'd thought we'd meet up in Denver like this?"

Pat hissed, "Shut up. There'll be more police nosing around outside. They'll hang us both at sundown if they catch us now."

Ezra nodded happily and settled back against the sideboards. He was thoroughly proud of the manner in which he had rescued Pat, without in the least understanding that his violent entrance into the police station had actually been the worst thing that could possibly have happened to his partner.

While Clancy loaded more wooden cases into the wagon behind them, Pat drew his right hand from his pocket and looked down hopefully at the dangling cuff.

Ezra's inopportune appearance had come just as Malloy unsnapped the left cuff. The key had still been inserted in the lock when Malloy dived away from his side. But Pat's heart sank when he saw the key was no longer there. It had evidently been lost while they made their dash for freedom. Though his hands were no

longer locked together, the incriminating links were still securely locked to his right wrist. If Ezra had only delayed another thirty seconds, Malloy would have had the other cuff also unlocked. But there was no use worrying about that now. Ezra was happy in the belief that his bold action had saved Pat from the hands of the police. There was no use taking that satisfaction away from the big man.

When Mike Clancy finished loading the wagon and put up the tail gate, he came around and climbed up on the high spring seat in front. He spoke to his two passengers over his shoulder without turning his head, "Here we go. There's cops watching on every street corner around here. Keep down and keep quiet."

He shouted to his team of draft horses and the heavily loaded wagon rolled away. Pat and Ezra kept down and kept quiet. They didn't bother to ask where they were going. Any place away from the vicinity of the police station was all right with them.

It took the draft team a long time to get the heavy wagon to its destination. Pat and Ezra were stiff and sore from the bumping ride on the wooden floor when Clancy finally shouted, "Whoa," and turned his head to grin down at them.

"You're all right, now. No cops around here."

Pat pulled himself up and saw they were in the railroad yards, with the loaded wagon drawn up by the open door of a boxcar on an isolated siding.

The Irishman jumped down and went around to the back of the wagon, saying briskly, "You can help me load this stuff if you're a mind to. It's due to leave town at six o'clock."

"Where to?" Pat jumped down lithely while Ezra clambered over the side behind him.

"This stuff's going to Pueblo. A rush order that's got to get out tonight." Clancy grinned at the handcuff

dangling from Pat's wrist. "A desprit criminal, eh? And maybe you are at that."

"Maybe I am," Pat agreed. He hoisted a wooden case on his shoulder and carried it to the boxcar. "You ain't got enough boxes here to nearly fill the car."

"Nope. It's a special shipment like I said." Clancy climbed into the car. "If you and your pard wanta set the boxes up to me, I'll stack them inside."

Pat said, "Sure. We owe you more than that." He got up on the wagon to hand the boxes down to Ezra who tossed them across to the boxcar as though they were loaded with feathers.

It didn't take long to complete the job with three of them working together, and when the crates were all stored inside, Pat asked Clancy:

"I wonder how it'd be if we crawled inside and stayed hid? We're headin' down Pueblo way ourselves."

"Be all right with me if you can stand to be locked in all night. There'll be a man along to seal the car pretty quick. Clancy looked at the two men curiously. "You look like a right one to me," he told Pat. "What kinda trouble you and your big pardner runnin' from?"

"Bad enough that we can't afford to get caught here in Denver," Pat told him grimly. "An' we're shore obliged to you . . ."

The Irishman waved a big freckled hand. "No thanks needed. I'd do the same for any men them cops was after. In with you, then. I'll close the doors tight and you won't be bothered. Come morning, you'll be in Pueblo."

Pat and Ezra crawled inside the boxcar and Clancy closed the sliding doors on them, making it completely dark inside. Pat stumbled back to a case where he sat down wearily and rolled a cigarette. He said to Ezra, "Awright now, you better tell me what fool stunt you an' Sam have pulled this time."

"'Twasn't so crazy," Ezra protested. "Not the way it's workin' out. Looks like we're safe enough now."

"Maybe. If they don't forget to unlock this car in Pueblo an' we don't starve to death. Tell me the whole thing . . . from the beginnin'."

"That's from Hopewell Junction." Ezra sat down beside Pat and took the makings from him in the darkness. "Sam an' me knowed it wasn't right for you to come to Denver alone, so we rode the caboose with Jeff Conroy who was shippin' yearlin's to market."

Pat snorted loudly. "Shore nice of you an' Sam to appoint yoreselves my bodyguards. I mighta known you'd do something like that. Keep talkin'."

"We got sidetracked at Pueblo. Had to wait over fer a freight. Didn't get to Denver till noon today."

Ezra struck a match to his cigarette. In the yellow flare of light his scarred face had a look of placid contentment.

"We went right to the Exchange Buildin' to hunt Biloff. Met him comin' out the door an' knew you'd awready argued with him when we saw his face." Ezra chuckled happily. "You beat him up purty good but I cain't figger why you stopped when you did. If *I'd* got holt of him . . ."

"Man named Schultz ran out an' called the police," Pat explained morosely. "They broke it up before I could get goin' good. Go ahead. What'd Mr. Biloff say?"

"Sam talked to him. He cussed you out good an' said he wasn't gonna do none of what you come to ask him. Then he crawled in a fancy surrey standing there with a colored driver in a fancy getup an' drove away.

"So Sam an' me started figgerin'. We knowed it was up to us . . . you bein' legal an' law-abidin' . . . an' we thought you'd done left town anyhow. So Sam hit on a smart idee. He bought him some shoe blackin' . . ."

"An' you went out to Biloff's house and stuck up the

Negro an' Sam changed clothes with him an' drove down to get Biloff," Pat interpolated.

"Yep. It worked fine. But how'd you know?"

"The police arrested me thinkin' I was the guy that helped Sam do it," Pat snapped.

"Oh yeh. Shore. I knew that. That's why I come down to get you loose. Lucky for you I did too, the way they had you locked up with them things on yore wrists," Ezra chuckled.

Pat sighed, and in the darkness jangled the short length of chain hanging from his wrist. "I ain't plumb shut of 'em yet," he grumbled.

"But this is better'n bein' locked up in jail," Ezra consoled him. "You know dang well it is. Where was I?"

"Sam had driven away to kidnap Biloff."

"Tha's right. With Jake's cap pulled down over his shoe-blacked face." Ezra chuckled happily. "That was a sight fer sore eyes."

"But it didn't work out quite so good when he come to pull off the job," Pat growled.

"No. It shore didn't. There was a fat feller there that sp'iled everything. Biloff got in the back not noticin' nothin' wrong, but this fat feller yells, 'Hey, you done got you a new coachman?' So, 'stead of drivin' off easy-like without no trouble, Sam has to pull his gun an' give the whole show away right there in the middle of town. An' that plumb ruined the plan we had fixed up so keerful."

"What plan? How did you hope to get away with a crazy trick like that?"

"Easy," Ezra asserted stoutly, "If Sam coulda got away from there without the police after him. He was gonna scoot out of downtown an' pick me up where no one would notice, an' then we figgered on persuadin' Mr. Biloff to write a note to his wife sayin' he was called outta town sudden an' not to worry none if he didn't

come back for several days. We was gonna get a boy to deliver the note home, an' then we was gonna start fer Powder Valley in the surrey."

"And I suppose," Pat said disgustedly, "that you didn't think anyone would suspect anything was wrong when they found the coachman all tied up in the stable?"

"We figgered that, too," Ezra assured him proudly. "In the note we was gonna have Biloff say 'twas all a joke some old friends had played on him, an' not to pay no never-mind to what Jake said about us."

"All right," Pat agreed in a weary tone, "so you had it all planned just right."

"Yeh. But that fat man ruined everythin' by callin' the police. They were chasin' Sam when he got to where he was to pick me up. He slowed jest enough fer me to hop in, an' then we went on hell-fer-leather. We knowed then that a note from Biloff to his wife wouldn't fix things up," Ezra concluded mournfully.

"And so?" Pat prompted.

"An' so we pulled off on a side road this side of Littleton an' dodged the bluecoats that was after us. An' Sam said I better take the team back, 'cause if we got caught we didn't wanta be hung fer hawse-stealin'."

"I reckon you thought kidnapin' Biloff wasn't very important?" Pat asked sarcastically.

"Well, it shore ain't like hawse-stealin'. Tha's one thing you know dang well Sam an' me wouldn't do." Ezra sounded excessively virtuous as he pointed out the difference between a mere kidnaping and the black crime of stealing horses.

"All right," muttered Pat. "So you took the hawses back. What'd Sam do?"

"He took out acrost country afoot with Biloff in front of him lookin' green aroun' the gills," Ezra chuckled. "Sam figgered he might could ketch a train ride or somethin' an' get Biloff to Powder Valley that-away without gettin' caught."

"What happened when you took the hawses back?"

"I stopped down the street a ways an' Injuned up to see what was what. There was policemen there an' I heard 'em talkin'. They said they had Pat Stevens locked up in jail . . . thinkin' you was the one that'd helped Sam do the job. So I jest hotfooted it down fer a look-see . . . an' there you was. An' here we are," Ezra ended happily.

"Yeh. In the middle of the worst mess we was *ever* in," Pat groaned. "We dasn't show our faces in Denver. The good Lord only knows where Sam is an' what's happenin' to him. An' no matter what happens to him, *we* can't lift a finger to help. You an' him sure fixed things up right."

He stopped abruptly as he heard footsteps outside the box-car door. There was the rattling of an iron bolt, then receding footsteps.

Ezra chuckled in the silence that followed. "No need to fret ourselves now," he announced comfortably. "We're locked in till we hit Pueblo whether we like it or not."

14

SAM SLOAN CROUCHED DOWN BEHIND a haystack in a meadow south of Denver and watched Ezra drive away in the glittering surrey behind the team of matched bays belonging to Mr. Biloff.

The owner of the team and surrey sat disconsolately on the stubbled ground in front of Sam. Mr. Biloff had lost his hat in Sam's wild dash for freedom and his long black locks hung dankly on each side of his ashen face. For the first time in a lifetime devoted to cheating other people, Mr. Biloff felt the clammy fingers of fear clutching his heart. He was convinced that Sam Sloan was crazy —and his one-eyed partner also. They had both refused to talk to him since rudely snatching him away from

the curb in front of the Exchange Building. He hadn't been able to make head or tail of the brief words they had exchanged in his hearing when Ezra swung aboard the surrey as it careened out Broadway in front of pursuing police.

After eluding their pursuers and turning off on this side road, they had stopped at an isolated spot and made him get out and crouch down behind a haystack where he couldn't overhear their conversation. Then the big, one-eyed man had driven away alone while the black-faced man wearing Jake's uniform got out and strolled over to squat down beside the financier.

The whole affair would have been ludicrous, like a fantastic scene lifted bodily from a stage melodrama, had not Mr. Biloff been convinced that both the men were maniacs. Sam's appearance was certainly laughable enough to fit him for end man in a minstrel show. Jake's uniform fitted him badly, and the cowboy boots showing beneath too-short pants were fully as ridiculous as the way in which the oversized uniform cap kept slipping down over his coal-black features.

But Mr. Biloff's sense of humor seemed to have deserted him entirely. Instead of laughing, a cold tremor of fear sent him into a fit of shuddering each time he dared to glance in Sam's direction. He had little doubt that the crazy man would pull his gun and kill him at any moment.

For Mr. Biloff now knew who the black-faced impostor was. He hadn't recognized Sam Sloan in his disguise until Ezra joined the party. But there could be no mistaking Ezra. Biloff's thoughts had flown immediately back to Powder Valley and to Ezra's partner whom he had encountered at noon in front of his office. He knew both the men had been closely associated with Pat Stevens in the past; and the true meaning of the whole monstrous riddle had at once become clear to him. Ever since he

had realized the identity of Sam Sloan, Judson Biloff had been preparing himself for death. In his case, there wasn't much he could do to prepare for the end. He had been a cruel and unscrupulous man for too many years to be hypocritical and attempt to change now. He only hoped his nerve would last and he would be able to meet death bravely.

When Sam settled back from watching Ezra drive away, Biloff turned a haggard face and unblinking eyes in his direction. He demanded hoarsely, "Why don't you *do* it? What are you waiting for? Isn't this as good a place as any?"

Sam pushed Jake's cap onto the back of his head and squinted at Biloff in mild wonderment. "Why don't I do *what?*"

"You know. W-what you're planning. Oh, I can tell. I know you have some absurd idea that my death will change things in Powder Valley. But I assure you it won't. The project will go on. My death will change nothing."

Biloff wet his lips and waited tensely to see if this logical appeal had any effect at all upon Sam. If the man still retained an iota of sanity he might be persuaded to abandon his murderous plan.

Sam slowly shook his head. "Killin' you would do one thing. It'd get a stink off the earth. Not that you mightn't keep on stinkin' after you was daid," he went on thoughtfully, "but I don't reckon it'd be as bad. No more'n any other daid man would stink, I reckon."

Biloff shuddered and gulped down his heart which had crawled up into his throat and threatened to choke him. His worst fears were confirmed. The man was a stark maniac. No slightest doubt about that. The only possible course of action was to pretend to agree with him. He coughed and forced a dry "Ha-ha," from his lips. "Most amusing. Yes, indeed. You are a droll fellow."

"What's 'at yo're callin' me?" Sam started forward, his eyes flashing angrily.

"No offense intended. None whatever. No indeed. I merely meant . . ."

Sam growled, "Shut up." He irritably rubbed his stubble of beard and aggravated the itching underneath the heavy coat of shoe blacking. "I got enough to worry about without tryin' to figger out them fancy words that I don't know what they mean."

He settled back against the pile of hay and relapsed into glum silence.

They sat that way for a long time. The sun was sinking behind the high range of serrated peaks westward and the lengthening shadows slowly merged into dusk.

A damp chill crept into Biloff's thin shanks from unaccustomed contact with Mother Earth, but with it came a warm glow of revived hope. Sam seemed in no immediate hurry to do away with him. He appeared, instead, to be waiting for something to happen. Biloff could not guess what he was waiting for, but any reprieve from immediate death was welcome. He kept thinking the police would surely arrive and search them out. It seemed preposterous that they could have lost the trail of the fleeing surrey. If he got out of this alive he'd certainly lead a movement for a thorough shake-up of the city police department. His taxes helped pay their salaries.

While Biloff was working himself up into a pleasant lather of rage against the inefficiency of the police, it was steadily growing darker in the hayfield.

Sam arose abruptly, as though he had made up his mind about something important. He said, "Take off yore coat an' yore tie an' collar."

Biloff stared up at him in fright. "Wh-at for?"

"Because I say so. Yank 'em off." Sam scowled and made a gesture toward the .45 in his waistband.

Biloff got to his feet unsteadily and removed his coat.

Sam threw off his uniform cap and the plum-colored tight jacket. He kicked a hole in the haystack and thrust the bundle of clothing inside. Biloff unfastened his collar and tie and removed them. Sam reached out his hand and ordered, "Gimme that coat."

He took it and tried it on. It was tight across the shoulders and much too long in the sleeves. Sam smiled a terrifying smile as he buttoned it up and looked down at himself. "Now grab a handful of dirt and mess up yore face," he directed harshly. "We're gonna be fixed up so nobody won't recognize either of us when we start out."

"When we start out . . . where?" Biloff quavered as he stooped and got a handful of dirt which he smeared over his face.

"To Powder Valley, of course." Sam looked at him in surprise. "Where'd you reckon?"

"I didn't know, I'm sure. Why are we going to Powder Valley? And how?"

"There's a hangman's rope waitin' fer you in Powder Valley," Sam told him harshly. "With a hundred men hankerin' to pull it an' stretch that long neck of yours till it cracks. Awright. I reckon that'll do. You don't look like you b'long in no fancy city office now. If ever I seen a hard-lookin' tramp, you shore fill the bill." Unexpectedly, Sam chuckled. In Biloff's ears, it sounded like fiendish merriment. "No, sir, I reckon we could walk right past a passel of *po*-lice right now an' they wouldn't do nothin' except mebby run us in jail for thirty days. Awright," he ended abruptly. "Start walking. Don't stretch them long laigs too fast 'cause mine're short an' I'm wearin' ridin' boots. I'll be right behind with a holt of my gun."

Then began one of the most terrible experiences Mr. Biloff had ever undergone. It was only light enough to make out ground obstacles dimly, and Mr. Biloff stumbled forward slowly with the knowledge that any false move might bring a .45 slug into his back. It grew cold

swiftly in the mile-high altitude once the sun had slid beneath the mountain peaks, and the cold gnawed into Biloff's coatless torso.

But he was afraid to argue, afraid to offer one word of opposition lest he smash the tenuous thread of sanity which he was positive was all that stood between him and immediate death.

It was a nightmarish journey westward through the straggling outskirts of the city until the financier finally struggled up the steep side of a railroad embankment and stumbled over the steel rails reaching southward from the city.

He floundered and fell face down upon the cinders and wooden ties between the rails, but Sam nudged him sharply with the toe of his boot and ordered, "Get up on yore hind laigs án' walk down the track. If we're lucky, we'll come to some switchyards or loadin' pens where mebby a train'll stop an' let us catch a ride. An' if we're not lucky you'll keep walkin' the ties all night."

Biloff drew in a sobbing breath and struggled to his feet. The sharp cinders had torn his pants and scratched his bony knees cruelly as he fell. He knew he couldn't go on farther. Death would be preferable. He drew himself up with an assumption of dignity and folded his arms. "Can't we discuss this without going farther? I'm prepared to . . ."

Sam slapped his mouth with the back of his hand. He growled, "We ain't discussin' nothin'. You passed up yore chance fer that with Pat Stevens this mornin'. Start walkin' down the track."

"But I'm ready to do anything . . . *anything* . . ."

"I don't figger on seein' the hangman's noose cheated." Sam gave him a violent shove. "Get goin'."

Judson Biloff got going. He bowed his head and floundered southward between the steel rails. A trickle of blood came from a split in his upper lip where Sam

had slapped him. He sucked the blood noisily into his mouth and it was pleasant running down his parched throat.

They went on and on interminably into the blackness of the night. Each time Biloff fell face downward from sheer exhaustion, Sam stood over him and cursed him until he found a further remnant of strength that drew him to his feet and sent him on.

He lost all sense of time and of distance, until he began to hear a loud roaring in his ears and his bleared eyes saw a peculiar yellow light that spread out in front of them.

He had a momentary thought that they had been walking all night and this was daylight until Sam growled, "Awright. Slide down to one side less'n you want the train to run over us."

Then he realized the roaring in his ears was the chugging of a locomotive toiling up the grade, and the yellow light came from the single headlight that glared balefully at them from the direction of the city.

Sam stooped over the land-company president and dragged him to his feet when he tripped over a rail and slid down the embankment.

"She's comin' slow an' easy up the grade," Sam muttered. "Must be pullin' a heavy load. Mebby slow enough fer us to grab her while she goes by."

Biloff's body was lax and his knees sagged. His mouth hung open and his breathing was loud and painful to hear.

Sam stared at him disgustedly in the yellow glow of the advancing headlight. "Yo're a Gawd-awful nuisance," he declared. "You ain't gonna be no help a-tall catchin' a ride, are you?"

He shook Biloff violently. The financier begged thickly, "Leggo. I do' wanna ride. Leggo."

Sam said, "Hell." He hesitated, then held Biloff off

from him with his left hand and smashed his right fist against the point of his sharp chin.

That reduced Biloff to a hundred and forty pounds of gangling dead weight, much easier to handle than when he was half-conscious.

Sam dragged him up the embankment and dropped him on the edge, squinted his eyes at the advancing headlight and set himself for the job that was coming.

When the huge locomotive crawled past at a speed of not more than ten miles an hour, Sam stooped and got Biloff in his arms, slung his thin body over his shoulder and waited until he saw the open door of an unloaded cattle car coming toward him.

He started walking fast, then broke into a trot as the open door came swiftly nearer. When it was opposite him, he heaved Biloff's unconscious body inside and made a desperate grab for the side of the door.

His clutching fingers missed and he fell flat on his face. He got up as the train rolled on, began trotting beside it again and reached up to catch the iron rungs at the end of the third car back.

He swung onto the step and held on grimly, then slowly climbed up and on top of the swaying car.

He tried to stand erect, but the wind whipped at him and the sidesway was more than he could take. He dropped to his knees and grimly crawled forward across the top of the car, was afraid to attempt jumping the gap between it and the next car, and climbed down the ladder at the front end, awkwardly shifted his weight to the rear ladder of the next car and climbed up on top again.

He negotiated the length of two cars in that precarious fashion, and was back on top of the cattle car into which he had hoisted Judson Biloff's unconscious body.

There was real heroism in this grim journey of Sam Sloan's over the swaying unfamiliar tops of the cars. He

expected to fall to his death every moment, but he couldn't give up now. He had to hurry and get inside the cattle car before Biloff came back to consciousness and realized he was unguarded.

He crept forward again to the middle of the cattle car, then slid down the perilous slope toward the edge directly above the open door that was his objective.

A sudden lurch broke his hold and sent him over the edge. His fingers gripped and held for a mere instant while his body swung free, then a lucky lurch in the right direction swung his body inward just as his fingers let go.

He landed heavily on top of the still slumbering body of Biloff. He rolled over and sat up, wondering if he was still alive—and if so, why?

A weary voice spoke to him from the far end of the car as he sat there, "I thought I'd seen everything in my time, until I witnessed your downward climb. Did you do it merely in a spirit of fun, or is that the way you think it's always done?"

15

SAM SLOAN SLOWLY DREW HIS GUN and rested it across his knees with the muzzle pointing at the unseen speaker. He grunted, "Who's doin' the talkin'?"

"I'm mostly called Jingle Joel, the genial man with the rhyming soul. You need fear me not, for I'm a sot. Though sober at present as a mother pheasant."

Sam blinked his eyes incredulously. His new companion sounded crazy but harmless. He muttered, "Sober as a mother pheasant? How d'yuh know a mother pheasant stays sober?"

"What, my man, do you think the birds of the field are addicted to drink?"

The voice moved nearer to Sam, and he made out the

small ragged figure of a man tiptoeing toward him with an exaggerated show of caution. Long gray locks were blown by the wind sweeping through the slatted cattle car, and he wore stiff, pointed chin whiskers that bobbed up and down as he spoke further, pointing his forefinger at the limp body of Judson Biloff:

"Is that carrion meat on the floor, or a living man about to snore?"

Sam chuckled and slid his .45 back out of sight. "He was a livin' man when I tossed him in. I dunno whether he's about to snore or not."

The poetical hobo squatted down on the other side of Biloff. He stared at Sam's blackened face with disconcerting candor and intoned:

"Your face is black but your voice sounds strange, less like a Negro than a rider of the range."

Sam grinned and rubbed his face with his fingertips. He admitted, "I ain't quite that black underneath this colorin'."

Jingle Joel nodded happily. He murmured, "A poor disguise is better than none, when from the law you are forced to run."

A loud, smothered snort escaped from Biloff's lips. He struggled to sit up and looked around wildly, sank back on the wooden floor when his gaze fell on the wizened and goateed face of the little man with the rhyming soul.

"Who are you?" he cried wildly. "Where am I?"

"I am I as you should guess, and you're traveling south on a slow express."

"But where . . . how? What happened to Sam Sloan?"

"You and Sam are safe on the lam. He's proved himself a friend tried and true, swinging from the rooftop to be here with you."

Biloff turned his head fearfully and saw Sam's face indeed on the other side of him. He groaned and closed his eyes, all hope of escape fading when he realized that

Sam had not been left behind as he had first hoped. Not only that, but here, evidently, was another maniac riding with them in the same cattle car. It was strange, Biloff thought, that he had never before realized there were so many crazy men loose in the world.

The little gray-headed man said gravely, "Your friend does not appear to be pleased, for the sight of your face his pain hasn't eased."

Sam said, "He ain't no friend of mine. He's a low-down snake an' I'm takin' him to Powder Valley fer a hangin'."

Jingle Joel squinted down at Biloff with interest. He nodded and agreed, "When I look close I do discern a face for which only a mother could yearn. But Powder Valley has a rhythmic sound, your homeland range, I'll be bound."

"Yeh. I live there."

"Stated tersely with directness and force. In the Valley I presume you ride a horse."

Sam said, "Yeh," again. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable in the little man's presence. He talked as if he'd come out of the pages of a book but he looked like a hobo. Sam couldn't figure him out at all. He wished he had chosen another car for the southward trip. He got out his makings and uneasily rolled a cigarette.

The aged rhymester held out his hand and said politely, "Though our friendship is new, my request is old, I beg a smoke when yours is rolled. And if you say me nay I'll blame you not, but hope when you die you go where it's hot."

Sam grinned and passed over his sack of tobacco and papers. "Do you hafta say things that way?"

"I cannot speak without a rhyme, not while my wits are in their prime," he was assured proudly.

"Some kinda disease?" Sam asked anxiously. "'Tain't catchin', I hope."

"A disease of the mind but not of the body. I do better with a hot toddy."

The little old man deftly rolled a cigarette and inserted it between his lips. "Now I must ask you for a light. Lean close to me and I'll not bite."

Sam leaned forward so the glowing tip of his cigarette touched the end of Jingle Joel's. The quaint little man settled back on his haunches puffing complacently.

"You spoke of hanging a moment ago. Were you fooling me or is it so?"

"It's so, right enough. If he don't up an' die on me 'fore I get him there." Sam nudged Biloff with his toe. "Whyn't you sit up an' take notice?"

Biloff sighed and remained prone.

"I fear he's the victim of deep despair, with a burden of guilt that's hard to bear. 'Tis stamped on his face, ugly and thin, the look of a man long steeped in sin."

"You said it, pard." Sam nodded admiringly. "Dog-gone, you shore know all the words that I ain't never heard before."

"Let us skip the praise and get down to truth. You look honest though uncouth. Tell me why you are painted black, and wearing a coat that fits like a sack. There's a mystery here, 'tis plain to see, and I'll not rest till it's told to me. I'm a tired old man with a yen for drink, but not a bum as you might think. You need not fear to tell your tale, if you get locked up I'll go your bail."

Sam had a feeling that he couldn't stand much more of the old man's rhyming. Already, his own thoughts were beginning to shape themselves in the same sing-song pattern. It was a disease, by God, and it was catching. He was already feeling the first symptoms. He knew if he didn't shut the old man up, he'd go crazy trying to think up rhyming words himself. And the only way he could see to make him shut up was to start talking him-

self. He drew in a deep breath and began relating the whole story of Powder Valley.

Jingle Joel did not interrupt the telling once. He listened with nods of approval and little clucking sounds of sympathy. When Sam had finished, he shook his head sadly:

"'Tis an unfair world where such things be, where the men with money are such as he. But what good will hanging do in this case? It won't the nesters from their farms displace."

"It'll rid the world of a skunk named Jud Biloff."

"True enough, my impetuous friend, 'twill suffice from this life him to rend. But what have you got when that is done? A lump of clay whose race is run. No, my stalwart defender of cattle, I fear you've chosen the wrong way to battle. Alive, this villain might restore your land, but dead, he'll never raise his hand. Laudable though I know your intent, I feel it was with purpose I'm sent. I am determined to stop your action, if I must join the farming faction."

Sam's brain was reeling under the impact of this rhymed logic. He muttered defensively, "Awright, then, what'd you do, if you was me an' I was you?" He caught himself with a gasp of alarm. Damn it! he *had* caught the disease. He was doing it too.

But Jingle Joel seemed to notice nothing strange in the rhymed reply. He merely said, "That is a problem we must study. When I am sober my thoughts are muddy."

Sam grunted sourly, "Yeh. I could do with a little drink, might jog me so I could think." He clamped his lips together in horror. No! He must get a grip on himself. This way lay madness.

He surged to his feet abruptly and went to the door to lean out and let the cold night air blow the insidious taint of rhyming madness from his mind. He wished

forlornly that he had a drink. Or that Pat was here to talk to him and stop that accursed jingling every time he opened his mouth.

He was vaguely conscious that the little goateed man had gotten up behind him and was going back to his own end of the car.

Sam drew in a great sigh of relief. Jingle Joel probably thought Sam was mocking him and felt insulted. That was fine. It was wonderful. If he'd just stay insulted and silent, Sam felt that he might yet retain his sanity.

He heard Judson Biloff scrambling about on the floor, and then sitting up with a low moan. For a moment, Sam heartily envied Biloff. The financier had at least escaped going mad by not listening to Jingle Joel.

He faintly heard the land-company president murmur, "Oh, my head. I wish I was dead."

Sam stiffened and turned his head slowly. Perhaps that was just an accident. Maybe Biloff hadn't *meant* it to be a rhyme. In a solicitous tone, he queried, "Feelin' better?"

His blood ran cold in his veins when he heard from Biloff's lips a weak, "Oh, yes, indeed! A drink is all I need."

Sam sagged against the side of the car and tried once more. "Where do you think you'll get a drink?" He shuddered as the words left his lips. He had unconsciously hesitated after "think." It had got him, by God. There was no use fighting against it. And it had evidently got Judson Biloff too, for he replied:

"I'm sure I hear the gurgle of liquor. See if your friend for a drink will dicker."

Sam Sloan gave up all pretense of remaining sane. He stumbled through the darkness toward the end of the car where Jingle Joel had a gallon jug resting in the crook of his elbow and tilted to his mouth.

"Save me a shot," Sam panted, "you old sot."

The rhymester sighed as he lowered the jug from his mouth. "To drink alone is an evil token, the only vow I've never broken. I only implore you to give it back, after you've partaken of my applejack."

Sam caught the jug from him fiercely and tilted it above his head. Biloff came forward timidly and implored:

"Give me a drink before I die, and after I'm drunk swing me high."

Sam hung on to the jug as his only hope of salvation. He dimly heard Jingle Joel reproving him:

"There are three of us with bellies eager, I sincerely trust your swallows are meager."

He staggered back and thrust the jug into Biloff's hands. His own voice sounded high and strange in his ears, "Tip it up an' take a swig, then we'll all dance a jig," and the pounding of the iron wheels on the rails beat out a rhythmic accompaniment to the gurgling of the jug.

16

THE CAR IN WHICH PAT AND EZRA were riding was sidetracked in Pueblo some time before dawn the next morning. Both men were awake and restless, but there was nothing they could do except stay locked in until someone came along and released them.

It wasn't a very happy prospect that faced them. They figured a squad of police might be awaiting them when the door was finally opened. And if they weren't arrested at once, there still remained the problem of making their way to Hopewell Junction somehow, getting their horses and riding on back to the security of Powder Valley before the long arm of the law from Denver reached that far and caught them up.

Added to that was the nagging uncertainty about Sam's whereabouts and his success or failure in getting away with his prisoner. Not that it made a hell of a lot of difference, Pat thought sourly. Everything was in the worst possible kind of mess. Between the three of them, it seemed to Pat they had managed to bungle everything completely. He wasn't fool enough to think that the law couldn't reach down into Powder Valley and snatch all three back to Denver to stand trial for their varied crimes. The time was past in the West when a man could hide out in a private stronghold and defy the law. Even if the other residents of the Valley stuck with them, it would only mean a bitter civil war with a lot of killing on both sides—the death of many innocent men—the one thing that Pat had been trying desperately to avoid.

And, though he did not discourage Ezra by telling him so, he saw no possible good that could come out of kidnaping Biloff. Even if Sam did succeed in getting him to the Valley undetected, Biloff was a stubborn man, and Pat doubted whether even the threat of hanging would be enough to force him to give up the Powder Valley project.

Here they all were, fugitives from justice—he, with a telltale pair of handcuffs still dangling from his wrist. And he and Ezra were locked up in a dark boxcar like a pair of trapped animals waiting for someone to come and release them. It was a completely gloomy outlook.

Pat paced up and down in front of the door and smoked innumerable cigarettes while he watched daylight show through a crack between the sliding doors, and then a bright gleam of sunlight that told him precious time was flitting by while he could only wait fretfully for whatever fate had in store for them.

Ezra was less perturbed about the eventual outcome than Pat. In fact, Ezra was complacently convinced that he and Sam had made a great contribution to the cause by their trip to Denver. He was quite proud of the ruse

by which they had snatched Biloff away from his office, and was optimistic about Sam's ability to carry out his end of the deal. He was proud, too, of the manner in which he had rescued Pat from the police station, for Pat hadn't spoiled the big man's simple pride in his feat by explaining that the police had been on the point of releasing him when Ezra spoiled everything by appearing in the doorway brandishing his gun.

So Ezra snored comfortably on a couple of wooden packing cases while Pat wore himself out striding up and down and worrying.

Pat suddenly ceased his pacing when he heard voices outside the box-car. He listened a moment, holding his breath. They stopped outside the door. He heard hearty laughter, then the rattle of the outside lock. He tiptoed over to Ezra's side and shook him violently, commanding in a low tone:

"Snap out of it, Ezra. They're unlockin' the door."

Ezra yawned and lumbered to his feet. "Who's out there, you reckon?"

"How the hell do I know? The police, maybe. Get hold of your gun an' be ready for anything."

Pat tiptoed forward and drew the revolver he had taken from the Denver policeman. He held the gun in his left hand, hidden under his jacket, and thrust his right hand deep in his pocket to hide the incriminating handcuffs from sight. If it wasn't the police they might be able to bluff their way out of the trap.

The doors creaked loudly as they slid apart and let a surge of hot sunshine inside. Ezra strode into the opening with his gun half-drawn, blinking his eyes against the sudden light, while Pat drew back out of sight to await developments.

"Yo're mighty slow about unlockin' this here parlor car," Ezra announced belligerently. "Danged if I ain't got a mind to sue the railroad fer the service."

A loud laugh greeted his words. Pat heard a won-

dering voice say, "We didn't order a gun-toting cowpuncher from Denver with this shipment, did we?"

And another voice answered with a chuckle, "He ain't on the bill of lading. Must of got loaded by mistake."

Pat stepped to Ezra's side swiftly, drawling, "That's shore enough right. By golly, that likker they sell in Denver is shore enough strong stuff. Where at are we?" he ended to help the pretense along.

A tall spectacled man laughed up at him from the ground. "There's two of them. What'd you boys do . . . hunt a place to sleep it off and get locked in by mistake?"

"That's right." The tall man's companion wore a greasy jumper suit and a stiff-brimmed hat. A searching glance out the door showed Pat the car stood on an isolated siding near the outskirts of Pueblo. He leaped to the ground nimbly and forced a short laugh from his lips, "You all don't know how good it feels to get out of that car. This here is Pueblo, ain't it?"

"That's right," the tall man laughed. "You boys better beat it fast before the railroad cop sees you and runs you in for vagrancy."

"You bet we will," Pat responded feelingly. He turned and winked at Ezra. "Hop down an' let's hunt a restaurant where they sell hot cawfee."

"There's a little café right down the street there." The spectacled man pointed as Ezra slid down beside Pat.

His companion stared at them with hostility. "I don't like this so much," he observed. "You reckon we shouldn't run 'em in for stealing a ride?"

The tall man frowned and shook his head. "They've just been sleeping off a drunk. You can't blame them for that."

Pat grinned and caught Ezra's arm. "C'mon. Let's get out of here." He pulled the one-eyed man away from the tracks and toward a side street where the restaurant had been indicated.

Ezra went with him under protest. "Whyn't you let me handle that feller?" he growled. "I'd of . . ."

Pat groaned aloud. "You'd have knocked him cold an' then we'd have the Pueblo police on our necks too. Keep your big mouth shut till we get out of town anyhow."

Ezra relapsed into an injured silence and allowed himself to be drawn into a small café where he devoured scrambled eggs and a huge stack of wheat cakes while Pat contented himself with three cups of scalding black coffee.

In answer to Pat's question, the counterman told him it was ten o'clock in the morning, and that the stagecoach left Pueblo for Hopewell Junction and points southeast at ten-thirty.

The coach traveled a route that took it out of town just three blocks from the café, and Pat and Ezra were waiting on the corner when it came rumbling down the street half an hour later.

The driver pulled up his six-horse team with a flourish when Pat stepped out and waved his hat.

He said, "Hopewell Junction? You bet," and opened the door to let them inside the swaying contrivance.

Pat entered first, keeping his handcuffs out of sight in his pocket, and was relieved to find only three passengers aboard; a cattle buyer from Kansas City and two elderly ranch wives who sat together at the rear of the coach.

It was a long, uncomfortable, and maddeningly slow ride. It seemed to Pat that the six-horse team must have a liberal portion of snail blood in their veins to be able to go so slowly. But the swaying motion of the vehicle made him drowsy after two nights without sleep, and it wasn't long before his head was resting on Ezra's shoulder and he was snoring lightly.

This time it was Ezra who awakened Pat from deep slumber when the journey was over. They were ap-

proaching the outskirts of the little railroad junction, and the long slanting shadows outside the stagecoach showed it was late afternoon.

Pat sat up with a start and peered out, then muttered to Ezra, "We better play safe and get out before we drive up in the middle of town."

Ezra said, "That's why I poked you," and they got up and went forward where Pat yelled up at the driver, "We want off right here."

The driver looked surprised, but he pulled up and let them out on the flat just north of town.

They circled warily around the business section to the livery stable where both had left their horses, and sneaked in the back entrance without being seen.

The hostler was an old man who greeted them without surprise. "I bin wonderin' when you'd be back fer them nags of your'n. You want 'em both saddled?"

Pat said they did. He asked the old man if anyone had been in town looking for them.

The hostler said he hadn't heard of anyone. As he led out their horses, Ezra nudged Pat and indicated a roan gelding in the stall next to his mount. "I reckon Sam ain't got here yet. That's his hawse standin' there."

As he saddled their horses, the old man grunted, "Lotsa comin' an' goin' to Powder Valley these days. A man'd think people'd stay put 'stead of chasin' back an' forth all the time. 'Nuff to make a man git disgusted an' quit his job."

"Anybody else been by here today?" Pat asked quickly.

"That's what I'm sayin', ain't it? Not more'n two hours ago three of the craziest galoots I *ever* see stopped by on their way." He stopped to spit a thick stream of tobacco juice on the floor, then pointed a gnarled forefinger at two jaded and sweaty buggy horses munching hay in adjoining stalls. "See that team yonder?" His voice trembled with indignation. "Plumb wore to a

frazzle . . . an' as nice a pair of hawseflesh as I ever laid eyes on. Know where they come from?"

"No. Where?"

"All the way from Pueblo, b'God. An' at a dead run if you ask me. Three crazy fellers in a buckboard drivin' 'em. Man's got no bizniss drinkin' an' drivin' a team."

"Who were they?" Pat asked idly.

"I didn't know none of 'em. Don't wanna know none of 'em. They traded teams an' went on to Powder Valley like the devil hisself was chasin' 'em. Wild-eyed drunk an' talkin' crazy . . . all three of 'em like they'd et a book of poetry an' was belchin' it out."

Pat's interest faded. "Couldn't have been law-men," he muttered.

"I reckon not. The little Negro seemed like he was boss. But there was a ol' coot with chin whiskers . . ."

Pat was starting to mount his horse. He stopped with one foot in the stirrup. "Did you say a Negro?"

"Yeh. Plenty funny lookin'. Wearin' cowboy boots an' tight pants and a big baggy coat. Come to think of it, he ast about you fellers, too. Friend of yores?"

"Asked about us?" Pat frowned. "What did the others look like?"

"One was a ol' feller with chin whiskers like a goat, an' t'other was tall an' stringy-like. He was *mighty* drunk. Kep' sayin' somethin' like: 'Gimme a drink afore I die, an' when I'm drunk swing me high.'" The old man dropped his voice into a monotonous singsong as he recited the words.

Pat's jaw sagged. He glanced doubtfully at Ezra who was listening with a baffled frown.

"An' they asked about us?" Pat repeated.

"That's right. The Negro shore did. I remember his very words, crazy-like, they was. They keep running through my mind an' I reckon mebby *I'm* goin' crazy too. He said: 'There's one thing that I got to ast, has

Pat an' Ezra this way passed?' Do you get it? Them were his very words. I swear they was."

Pat's jaw sagged lower. "He was talkin' po'try. Couldn't be Sam." He looked to Ezra for agreement.

"Hell, no!" Ezra exploded. "*Couldn't* be." But he frowned at the hostler. "You know Sam Sloan?"

"Shore I know Sam. Sa-ay!" The old man staggered back a step, clapping his hand to his forehead. He mumbled, "I'm recollectin' things now. Things that didn't make sense when they was here. But that ain't strange. Nothin' made sense when them three was here."

"What kind of things?" Pat demanded.

"Yessiree. I see it clear now. Dagnab it. *That* was Sam Sloan. Blacked up like a Negro. A-foolin' me with that there singsong talk."

Pat wasted no more time in idle conversation. He swung into the saddle and spurred out of the stable, closely followed by Ezra. If Sam was ahead of them, roaring drunk with a two-hour lead, only God could say what was happening in Powder Valley.

They didn't waste any breath in talking as they thundered along the road toward Powder Valley. The sun was descending into an angry red haze in the west and there were crimson streamers in the sky like long, fiery fingers pointing directly to their destination.

The men rode easily, grim-faced in the saddle, gauging the speed and the staying-power of their mounts to cover the distance in the shortest possible time without killing the stouthearted horses beneath them.

The sun went below the mountains and darkness shrouded the flat land leading into the foothills where the Valley twisted downward on both sides of Powder Creek. The stars came out and the thin rim of a moon showed palely close above the horizon. Clumps of sage and of mesquite threw misshapen shadows on the ground as they raced past and the gangling arms of yucca formed

themselves into weird patterns in the cold light of the stars and the moon.

Pat began to ease his horse up as they approached the turnoff where a rutted road led upward from the main route into the valley toward Sam and Ezra's ranch near the headwaters of the creek. He twisted sideways in the saddle and shouted to Ezra, "Do you reckon they went straight on to Dutch Springs or would Sam go to the ranch first?"

"Gawd knows," Ezra panted, "what Sam'll do when he's likkered up like the old man said. Hard enuff to figger him when he's sober."

Pat pulled his slobbering horse down to a lope and then to a trot as they reached the turnoff. He leaped from the saddle and bent down to search the hard ground for some trace of wheel tracks to determine whether the buckboard had turned off or continued on to Dutch Springs.

Ezra stepped down beside him, grunting, "We need Sam's Injun nose fer this job. He can smell out a set of fresh tracks."

"I can't match Sam for running a trail," Pat agreed. "But these here tracks look fresh enough. See? Two hawses, trottin' fast. That'd be a harness team. An' right here . . . the left wheel cut through the rut."

"Yep. Yo're right. There's been a buckboard drove up to the ranch this very afternoon."

They trotted back to their horses and swung into the saddles again. Pat began to hope they might not be too late to avert disaster. If they could catch Sam and Biloff, with their queer companion, before the trio got into Dutch Springs and the Valley ranchers learned of Biloff's presence—they might be able to prevent the hanging that Pat wanted desperately to avoid. He knew it would ruin everything if they hanged Biloff in the valley. Inevitably, it would bring in State troopers, martial law,

and the irrigation project would go on anyway.

But if he could get hold of Biloff, there was a chance that a cool head and some hard logic would convince the man the only way he could save his own skin was to call off the project. That was the chance Pat was fighting for, the hope that made him spur his faltering mount cruelly up those final miles toward the ranch where he hoped to intercept Sam and his kidnaped prisoner.

They were less than a mile from their destination when they heard a galloping rider coming from the direction of Dutch Springs on a course that was taking him across their road directly in front of them.

Pat spurred his tired horse to a final burst of speed to intercept the lone rider. As they neared each other, he rose in the stirrups and shouted:

"Halloo ahead. Who's that?"

A voice came back thinly: "This is Hank Bates. Who're you?"

"Pat Stevens . . . and Ezra. Hold up a minute."

The other rider slowed to allow Pat to reach him. Hank's voice was frankly incredulous, "Did you say Pat Stevens?" Then, "By golly! it *is* Pat. How'd you get here?"

Pat's horse stumbled and almost went down as he pulled up in the road. "No matter how we got here," he snapped. "What's happenin'?"

"You're just in time for the fun if you ride fast," Hank panted. "They're blowin' up the powder house at the damsite. Ain't got much time to get there . . ."

"Wait a minute." Pat grabbed his arm. "What about Sam an' Biloff?"

"*What* about Sam? I thought he was in Denver. I thought you was *all* in Denver . . . in jail, the way I heard it."

Pat's grip tightened on his arm. "The way *you* heard it? How?"

"Mr. Winters read all about it in his Denver newspaper this afternoon. About you getting arrested for jumpin' Biloff and about how the police was hot on the trail of Sam and Ezra. So when word got around that there wasn't no use waiting any longer for you to maybe fix things, the boys got together and headed up to blow up the powder house. It's built right on the edge of the crick where they're going to dam it, and it's full of dynamite and powder. The boys figure it'll blow such a hole in the ground they'll never get a dam built . . . and the engineers and workers are living in a bunkhouse right close by and some think the explosion will maybe blow all of them to kingdom come along with the powder house."

Pat groaned aloud as he understood what was happening. Though Biloff's life was in no immediate danger, this was a far worse threatened disaster. If the Valley men succeeded in their plot and caused the wholesale slaughter of the dam workers, *nothing* could save the Valley.

He slid from his saddle, dragging Hank down to the ground with him. "My hawse is winded . . . an' unbuckle yore gun belt. All I got is a peashooter I stole from a policeman. Give it to me," he ground out. "I got no time to explain. I got to stop them from blowing up the powder house."

He grabbed the gun belt from Hank's numbed fingers and swung it about his waist. "You an' Ezra come along as fast as our hawses will bring you. Ezra will explain everything."

He threw himself into Hank Bates' saddle and drove his spurs into the ribs of the comparatively fresh horse, leaned forward and drove him upward at headlong speed toward the construction camp and its flimsy powder house stacked high with barrels and cases of dangerous explosives.

17

THE SAGE AND MESQUITE OF THE valley gave way to low clumps of juniper and pine as the trail climbed swiftly upward. Pat spurred the horse on recklessly, trusting the animal to carry him to his destination.

He didn't know exactly where the construction camp was located, knew only its general position from talk he had heard in Dutch Springs. Hank Bates hadn't mentioned how many men were in the raiding party, nor how big a start they had on him.

Pat knew only that he had to get there in time and somehow break up the attack on the powder house. Nothing could possibly save the Valley if the hotheaded and irresponsible riders were allowed to carry out their reckless plan for the destruction of the damsite and the murder of innocent workmen in their sleep.

Pat caught himself praying for more speed as the horse's stride faltered beneath him. He roweled the animal without mercy, lying forward along his neck and straining his eyes through the night for some sign that he was approaching the camp.

His mount snorted and swerved aside suddenly. A nicker came from the darkness ahead. Then a match flared a hundred yards to Pat's left just as he made out the squat outline of buildings in that direction.

The tiny flare of the match leaped magically into a large yellow flame that flickered against the wooden sides of a low building. It was a gasoline-soaked torch being thrust upward toward a tiny barred window in the wall of the wooden powder magazine.

Pat dragged Hank's gun from his hip and flipped a bullet at the torch while he drove his horse toward the low building. The torch fell to the ground and Pat

caught an instant's glimpse of a surprised face behind it in the night.

Guns barked from his right, and flame lashed at him from a dozen points. A bullet ricocheted from the steel saddle horn and another zinged off the handcuff dangling from his right wrist.

He saw dark forms slinking toward the door of the powder house, and he plunged his horse forward between them and their objective, swinging his leg off and crouching low in the left stirrup to put the animal's body between himself and the gunfire of the valley men.

The horse shuddered and stumbled forward as bullets crashed into his unprotected side.

Pat flung himself forward and hit the ground rolling. He reeled to his feet in front of the door that stood ajar, and threw two bullets over the heads of the advancing men.

He shouted hoarsely, "Hold it! It's Pat Stevens. Don't you hear me? This is Pat."

He couldn't tell whether they heard him or not. A bullet thudded into the door behind him and another one tugged at the sleeve of his jacket.

He jerked the heavy door open and slid inside, stumbling over an open keg of powder. Hoarse shouts and a withering hail of bullets followed him through the door.

He knew it was impossible to make his voice heard above the din. He was trapped inside the powder magazine with two score angry men advancing from all directions to put fire to the building.

He slammed the door shut but made no attempt to bar it, poked Hank's gun through the crack and fired two more shots, again aiming them high so they would not hit one of his erstwhile friends.

At least, he thought grimly, the construction workers would be aroused to the danger. They would have a chance to escape from their beds before the entire countryside went up in a horrible explosion.

Light seared his eyeballs. He whirled to see a gasoline-soaked torch come hurtling in through the small window with its inadequate wooden crossbars.

The interior of the structure was lighted luridly for that one awful instant as Pat leaped forward and made a desperate grab that caught the flaming torch in midair. The scene was burned into his mind with such clarity that ever afterward he could close his eyes and see the open powder kegs, the carelessly piled cases of dynamite that littered the floor.

His left hand was seared as he clung to the torch, holding it aloft to keep the licking flames from the open powder.

Somehow, he got his leather jacket off and smothered the torch enough to crack the door wide and fling it outside.

A chorus of derisive jeers and a blast from many guns answered the action.

They were close to the powder house now, kill-crazed men rushing forward to destroy the man who dared to thwart their murderous and destructive purpose single-handed.

He braced himself against the door, fought to get the bar in place, but there was a surge of battering bodies against it.

Another torch flared outside the window at his left, and he jerked his head to see an arm thrusting it through the opening.

He fired from his left hand with Hank's gun and the torch fell inside atop a wooden case of dynamite.

At the same moment the door gave inward and the muzzle of a gun was pushed in to spit flame and lead past his shoulder.

He grabbed the hot barrel of the .45 with his free hand and gave a tremendous jerk, stepping backward to let the door fly open and shouting again:

"It's Pat Stevens, you fools. *Pat!* Don't you hear me?"

Men backed away in the darkness from the sagging door with a low muttering and cursing among themselves.

Shouts of awakened men came from the aroused construction workers in the bunkhouse near by. Lights gleamed from the windows and the crew of workmen streamed out to see what the shooting was all about.

Above the loud tumult, Pat heard a vicious crackling behind him. He whirled and leaped on the torch that was charring through the wooden top of the dynamite case, snatched it up by the wooden handle a moment before the flames ate through the thick wood to the explosives below.

A weird sight met his eyes at the rear of the shack as he turned weakly with the torch safe in the air.

Three faces stared at him over a waist-high row of dynamite cases. One of the faces was smeared with shoe blacking with rolling eyes glittering in the lurid light of the torch.

The one beside him was old and wizened. A shrewd face with stiff chin whiskers and matted gray eyebrows.

And the third face faintly resembled the features that had once belonged to Judson Biloff. Grimed with dirt and contorted with terror, Pat would never have recognized him had he not realized in a flash who the trio must be from the description given him by the hostler in Hopewell Junction.

Pat didn't try to figure out what the three men were doing in the back of the powder magazine. He didn't waste any breath on questions. He knew only that the Lord had delivered his enemy unto him and that another opportunity like this would never come to him.

He strode toward them, brandishing his torch and demanding, "You, Biloff. Are you ready to die?"

"No! Stevens! For God's sake keep that torch in the air above the dynamite. Surely you're not going to destroy us now that you've risked your life to save us."

Pat growled, "Maybe not. That depends on you." Through the open door behind him he could hear the receding sound of gunfire as the Valley raiders retreated before the onslaught of the aroused construction workers.

"I'll do anything. God above in His righteousness, hear me. I'll do anything you ask. You've saved my life, Stevens. I can never repay you," the terrified financier babbled.

"You can repay me all right. Sure, I saved your life." Pat didn't ruin the moment by admitting Biloff's presence was a complete surprise to him. "I only saved it for one reason . . . because you're the only man that can call off this dam-buildin' . . . give us back our land . . . give the farmers back their money . . ."

"Of course I will. I'll do anything. Sign anything. Only, for God's sake throw that torch outside If you care nothing for your own life, I implore you to spare mine."

Pat gave a grunt of disgust. "Awright. You've said it with two witnesses. An' no charges against Sam, huh? You'll swear you came with him of your own free will?"

"Of course! I'll swear to anything if you'll throw that cursed torch outside."

Pat hesitated. He demanded of Sam and Jingle Joel, "You heard him? You can prove it?"

Sam said, "You bet we heard it," and Jingle Joel bobbed his goatee up and down vigorously:

"You've made your point and made it well, but it'll do us no good if we wake up in hell."

A puzzled grin spread over Pat's face. He strode to the door and threw the torch away where it could burn down safely.

Behind him in the dark interior he heard Jingle Joel saying gratefully, "Thank God for life and a jug that's unbroken; let us all have a drink as a good-will token."

His words were followed by a pleasant sound of gurgling. It was interrupted by Sam stumbling toward

Pat and proclaiming fervently, "Not me, fellers. I've done swore off applejack for the rest of my natural life."

Pat laughed and caught him by the arm. "How in hell come you fellows here?" he demanded in a low tone.

"I dunno, rightly. It was that damn applejack. We started for the ranch but Biloff got a notion to take a look at the damsite. We was sleepy when we got here an' jest crawled in the first door we saw to sleep it off. I shore didn't know I had a case of dynamite for a pillow."

Behind them, Judson Biloff was saying happily, "Give me a drink, for I'm not to die, and when I'm drunk I shan't swing high." More and louder gurgling followed his pronouncement.

It was too late that night to do anything to change Biloff's promises into fact, and besides, he was too drunk. But next morning, chastened and with an aching head, he followed Pat's orders as arrangements were made to sell the bottom land back to the ranchers. A telegram was sent to Schultz, instructing him to bring the land-company records, a large sum in cash, and the company's checkbook. Another telegram was dispatched to the Denver police, informing them that there was no cause for alarm in his departure, that he was merely taking several days' holiday, and to drop all charges against Sam, Ezra and Pat.

By noon, a throng of ranchers had gathered in the street before Hopewell Junction's little hotel, where Pat had spent the night guarding Biloff. They moved about, muttering and talking in low voices. All of them were armed—a sight unusual in Powder Valley. Pat knew it would not take much to set them off again, and he doubted he could prevent violence a fourth time. Biloff's nerves, already wrecked by his experiences of the past few days, were strained more and more to the breaking

point as the day wore on. At last, in the middle of the afternoon, Schultz arrived, clutching a bulging brief case in one hand and with the other clinging desperately to the buckboard driven by the sheriff, who had met him at the station. He was quickly brought into Biloff's room, and the settlement began.

While Pat and the sheriff watched, Biloff wrote checks to all the farmers who had bought Powder Valley land, and letters explaining that the project had been called off. Joe Hartsell was sent for and handed his five hundred dollars, plus another two hundred to help the family over the winter. Biloff demurred at paying the extra two hundred, but Pat merely glanced idly out the window at the crowd in the street below. The significance of the glance was not wasted on the land-company president, and he hastily counted the money into Hartsell's hand.

By this time it was late in the afternoon. Pat had the ranchers come in one by one, hand over the money they had been paid by Biloff, and receive the deeds to the bottom land in return. And when they had gone, Culver and his men were sent for and paid off. Before leaving, Culver came over to Pat and extended his hand.

"I want to thank you for saving all our lives last night, Stevens. And I'm sorry we had to meet on such disagreeable terms. Perhaps we'll meet again some day—but not if I'm asked to build a dam in Powder Valley. Biloff's actions have convinced me you were right about its not being farm land," he said.

"Forget it," Pat replied, shaking the proffered hand. "I was saving all our lives, really, including my own. And you're not to blame—you were only doing your job. Good-by, and come around to see us some time."

To clinch matters, Biloff—though under pressure—signed a statement affirming that the settlement had been made of his own free will and not by coercion. It wasn't exactly a legal way of doing things, Pat realized, but it

was just, and would prevent Biloff from ever making trouble in Powder Valley again. When it was all over, he said to Biloff, "You can stay here tonight—but clear out early in the morning. You already made too much of a bad smell around here."

"Stay here tonight? In this horrible place?" Biloff babbled. "Never! I want to leave *now*. And I hope nobody ever mentions Powder Valley to me again!" And escorted by the sheriff, he and Schultz left for the station to board the last train out for the day.

Wearily, Pat walked out of the hotel, to be faced by a sheepish mob of ranchers, headed by John Boyd. Boyd stepped forward and said, "We all want to thank you, Pat, for all you done. If you hadn't stopped us, we'd of had the troopers in here sure. And it would of meant the end of the valley besides."

Pat held up his hand. "Don't thank me," he replied. "I was to blame as much as any of you. But let this be a lesson to all of us—not to sell our bottom land no more to anybody, even if he says he wants it to raise giraffes. And now I want to go home. I'm mighty tired, and I'd like to see my wife if she'll have anything more to do with a jailbird and hobo like me," he ended with a grin.

"Oh, Pat! You idiot!" came a voice at his elbow. "I've been waiting out here on the porch for you all afternoon. You're coming home with me right now!"

"Sally!" he said, and grinned again, happily.

"No more talk now. Into the buckboard with you—and not another word till we get home."

Meekly and silently, Pat climbed into the buckboard after helping Sally up, and submitted quietly when she took the reins out of his hands. As they drove out of town, with the sun's last rays stretching the shadows of the buckboard's wheels weirdly out of shape along the ground, his hand stole out and covered hers. She looked at him and smiled, and he took his hand away and put his arm around her.

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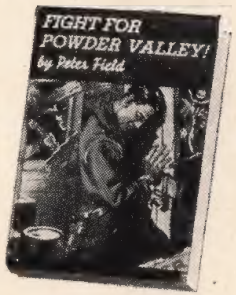

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